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NOTHING NEW.

T A L E S.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,”

&c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE WATER CURE.

“Having our minds sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”

CHAPTER I.

“Now, if I knew—Lord help me! I often feel as if I did not know—whether the next life be any better than this, whether getting rid of the body be any advantage to the soul—I would gladly die to-morrow!”

“By Jove! Alick, *I* haven’t the slightest wish of the kind.”

We two—Austin Hardy and Alexander Fyfe—as we sat over the fire in my lodgings, in Burton Crescent, were not bad types of two classes of men, not rare in this our day, who may stand convicted as moral suicides—mind-murderers and body-murderers.

We were cousins, but at the opposite poles of society—he was rich, I poor. The world lured him, and scouted me; its pit of perdition was opened wide for us both; but he was kissed, and I was kicked, into it. Now we both found ourselves clinging to its brink, and glaring helplessly at one another from opposite sides, wondering which would be the first to let go, and drop to—where?

It was the 1st of November. I had sat hour after hour, the MS. of my last book before me; the finished half on my left hand grinned at the unfinished half on my right—to wit, a heap of blank sheets, at least two hundred. Two hundred pages that, by Christmas, *must* be covered—covered, too, with the best fruit of my soul, my heart, and my brains; else my dear friend the Public would say, compassionately, “Poor fellow! he has written himself out;” or, sneeringly, “If these authors did but know when to stop!”

Stop?—with life and all its daily needs, duties, pleasantnesses—(pshaw! I may draw my pen through *that* word), hammering incessantly at the door! With old Age’s ugly face, solitary

and poor, peeping in at the window—Stop, indeed !

I had been in this agreeable frame of mind when my cousin Austin lounged into my room.

“Do I interrupt you?” he said, for he was a kindly-hearted fellow, though not overburdened with brains, and wholly uninitiate in the life of literature.

“Interrupt ! no, my good fellow. I wish you did,” said I, with a groan. “There is nothing to interrupt. One might as well spin a thread-of-gold gown out of that spider line dangling from the ceiling, as weave a story out of this skull of mine—this squeezed sponge, this collapsed bladder ; it’s good for nothing but to be a dining-hall to a select party of worms.”

“Eh ?” said he, innocently uncomprehending.

“Never mind. What of yourself, Hardy ? How are the hunting and the shooting, the betting and the play-going, the dinner-parties the balls ?”

“All over.”

He shook his head, and a severe fit of

coughing convulsed his large, strong-built frame.

"I'm booked for the other world. I wish you were my heir."

"Thank you; but, for so brief a possession, it wouldn't be worth my while."

I lit a candle, and we stood contemplating one another. Finally, we each made the remark with which I have commenced this history. Let me continue it now.

"Why do you want to die, Alexander Fyfe?"

"To escape the trouble of living. Live! —it's only existing; I don't live—I never lived. What is life but having one's full powers free to use, to command, to enjoy? I have none of these. My body hampers my mind, my mind destroys my body, and circumstances make slaves of both. I look without—everything is a blank; within——"

I beg to state to the reader, as I did to Austin the next minute, that I am not used to whine in this way; but I was ill, and I had sat for five hours with a blank page before me, upon which I had written precisely five lines.

Austin's face expressed the utmost astonishment.

"Why, I didn't know anything amiss with *you*; you always seem to me the happiest fellow alive. A successful author, with only yourself to look after—no property, no establishment, no responsibilities; just a little bit of writing to do each day, and be paid for it, and all's right."

I laughed at his amusingly unsophisticated notion of an author's existence.

"Then, so hermit-like as you live here, all among your books. My poor dear aunt herself, if she could see you ——"

"Hush! Austin."

"Well, I will; but all the world knows what a good woman she was, and you take after her. You live like a saint, and have no temptation to be otherwise. Now, I am obliged to go post-haste to destruction, if only to save myself from dying of ennui."

Another fit of coughing cut him short. I forgot my own despair in pitying his, for he seemed to hold that cheating vixen Life with such a frantic clutch, and she was so visibly slipping from him. There, at least, I felt

myself better off than he. This world was all my terror; of that to come, dark as its mysteries were, I had no absolute fear.

“You’re hard up, Austin, my boy. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. It isn’t consumption, they say. It will turn to asthma, most likely. All my own doings, the doctors say—would have knocked up the finest constitution in the world, which I had ten years ago”—with a piteous groan.

“Well, confess. What has done it?”

“Smoking, late hours, and,” after a pause, “hard drinking.”

“Whew!” It was a very dolorous whistle, I believe.

“What is a fellow to do?” said Hardy, rather sullenly. “Life is so confoundedly slow? You want excitement—you take to the turf or the gaming-table. If you win, you must drink and be jolly; if you lose, why drink and drown care. Then other perplexities—womankind, for instance: you run after an angel, and find her out something on the other side of humanity; or she’s sharp and clever, makes a mock of you, and marries

your friend ; or she tries to jump down your throat, and you might have her so cheap, she isn't worth the winning?"

"Is that the fact in your case?"

"My lad, you'd find it so, if you had ten thousand a-year."

This was a doubtful compliment, certainly : but he meant it in all simplicity. Besides, I knew enough of his affairs to be aware that the circumstances he mentioned in this impersonal form were literally true.

"I wonder, cousin, you are not weary of this hunting after shadows. Why don't you marry?"

"Marry ! I ? to leave a wife a widow next year. Though *that* would raise my value in the market immensely. Seriously, Alick, do you think there is any woman in the world worth marrying ? I don't, and never did."

I was silent. Afterwards he said, in an altered tone—

"I did not not quite mean 'never.' Was she fifteen or sixteen when she died, Alexander?"

I knew he was thinking of his old child-sweetheart, my little sister Mary.

"No, no ; marrying is out of the question. Whether I die early or late, I shall certainly die a bachelor. Shall you?"

"Very probably."

And, as I glanced at the two hundred blank pages, and the two hundred more scrawled over, I hugged myself in the knowledge that, if it came to starvation, there was only one to starve—no pale wife, fading slowly from a dream of beauty into a weak slattern, peevish and sad ; no sickly children, wailing reproaches into the father's heart, not only for their lost birthright, but for their very birth. "No," I thought, with set teeth and clenched palms, as if the time of my youth were a bitter fruit between my lips, or a poison-flower in my hands, and I were grinding both to powder—"No, as old Will hath it, *'Tis better as it is.*"

"Still," cried I, rousing myself, for poor Austin's case was worse than mine, and he had more responsibilities in the world—"still life is worth a struggle, and you know you hate your next heir. Once more, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Have you any doctor?"

"Three."

"Then you are a dead man, Austin Hardy."

"So I believe."

Again a long pause.

"I can't leave you this estate, Alick, you know, and I have spent most of my ready-money; but I have left you my cellar and my stud—they will be worth a thousand or two; so you needn't kill yourself with this sort of work," pointing to the MS., "for a few years to come. That will be one good out of my dying."

"My dear boy, if you say another word about dying, I'll—you see Corrie's Affghan cutlass there—I'll assassinate you on the spot."

"Thank you."

"By-the-bye," and a sudden brilliant thought darted into my mind, "did you ever meet my friend Corrie?"

"No."

"The finest, wholesomest, cheeriest fellow, with a head big enough to hold two men's brains, and a heart as large as his head. I

had a letter from him this morning. He gave up army-service some time since, began London practice—searched fairly and honourably into all the nonsense going—tried allopathy, homœopathy, kinesopathy, and heaven knows how many pathies besides ; and has finally thrown them all aside, and, in conjunction with his father, Dr Corrie, has settled in ——shire, and there set up a water cure.”

“ A what did you say ? ”

“ A hydropathic establishment—a water-cure. Have you never heard of such places ? ”

“ Ah, yes, where people sit in tubs all day, and starve on sanitary diet, and walk on their own legs, and go to bed at nine o’clock—barbarians ! ”

“ Exactly. They cut civilisation, with all its evils, and go back to a state of nature. Suppose you were to try it, you have so long been living ‘ agin nature,’ as says our friend Nathaniel Bumpo—but I forget you don’t read—that if you were to return to her motherly arms, she might take you in, and cure you—eh ? ”

“ Couldn’t—impossible.”

So many possibilities frequently grew out

Hardy's "impossible," that I was not a whit discouraged.

"Here is Corrie's letter, with a view of his house on the top of the page."

"A pretty place."

"Beautiful, he says; and James Corrie has visited half the fine scenery in the world. You see, he wants me to go down there, even without trying what he calls 'the treatment.'"

"And why don't you?"

I laid my hand on the blank MS. leaves—

"Impossible."

Austin soon after went away. I shut the shutters, stirred the fire, rang for the student's best friend—a cup of hot tea, no bread therewith. Yes, though rather hungry, I dared not eat; we head-workers are obliged to establish a rigorous division of labour between the stomach and the brain. Ugh! that one piece of dry toast would spoil at least four possible pages—can't be! And that uncut magazine, with a friend's article therein, how tempting it looks! But no; if I treat myself with his fiction, I shall lose the thread of my own; and if I sit thus, staring into the cosy fire,

I shall go dream and then——Now for it. Approach, my MS., that I used so to love—you friend, you mistress, you beloved child of my soul! How comes it that you have grown into a fiend, who stands ever behind me, goading me on with points of steel, ready to pierce me whenever I drop? But many a human friend, mistress, or child does just the same.

Now, surely I can work to-night. Come back, dreams of my youth! I am writing about folk that are young; so let's get up a good love scene—a new sort of thing, if I can—for I have done so many, and reviews say I am grown “artificial.” Reviews! Ten years ago, what cared I for reviews! I wrote my soul out—wrote the truth that was in me—fresh, bursting truth, that would be uttered, and would be heard. To write at all was a glory, a rapture—a shouting out of songs to the very woods and fields, as children do. I wrote because I loved it—because I could not help it—because the stream that was in me would pour out. Where is that bright, impetuous, flashing, tumbling river now? Dwindled to a dull sluice, that all my digging

and draining will only coax on for a mile or two in a set channel—and it runs dry.

Well, now for the page. These five lines—rich day's work—what drivelling inanity! There it goes into the flame. Let's start afresh.

Once, twice, thrice, four times, a new page flies, in fine curling sparkles, up the chimney. Thank heaven, I have sufficient wit left, at least, to see that I am a dull fool. Try again.

This time comes nothing! My pen makes fantastic circles over the white page—little bird's nests, with a cluster of eggs inside—or draws foolish, soft profiles, with the wavy hair twisted up Greek fashion, as I used to scrawl over my bedroom walls when I was a boy. My thoughts go “wool-gathering”—wandering up and down the world, and then come back, and stand mocking and jibing at me.

How is it all to end? I cannot write. I have no more power of brain than the most arrant dolt—that especial dolt whom I hear whistling down the Crescent—

“Cheer boys, cheer, the world is all before us.”

Oh, that it were! Oh, that I were a back-

woodsman, with a tree and a hatchet, and the strength of labour in these poor, thin, shaking hands! Oh, that I had been born a plough-lad, with neither nerves nor brains!

My head is so hot—bursting almost. This small room stifles me. Oh, for one breeze from the old known hills! But I should hardly feel it now. I don't feel anything much. My thoughts glide away from me. I only want to lie down and go to sleep.

There! I have sat twenty minutes by the clock, with my head on my hands, doing nothing, thinking nothing, writing nothing—not a line. The page is as blank as it was three hours ago. My day's work, twelve golden hours—has been absolutely nothing.

This cannot last. Am I getting ill? I don't know. I never do get ill. A good wholesome fever now—a nice, rattling delirium—a blistering and bleeding, out of which one would wake weak, and fresh, and peaceful as a child—what a blessing that might be! But I could not afford it—illness is too great a luxury for authors.

But—as I said to poor Austin some hours since—what is to be done? Something must be done, or my book will never be finished.

And, oh, my enemy—oh, my evil genius, that used to be the stay of my life—with a sad yearning I turn over your leaves, and think it would grieve me after all, if you, the pet babe of my soul, were never to be born alive.

If anything could be done ! I do not drink, I do not smoke ; I live a virtuous and simple life. True, I never was very strong, but then I have no disease ; and if I had, is not my soul independent of my body ? Cannot I compel my brain to work—cannot I ? for all you used to argue, my sapient friend, James Corrie, M.D. And his known handwriting, looking me in the face to-day, brings back many a sage practical warning, disregarded when I was in health and vigour, mentally and physically—when it seemed to me that all authors' complainings were mere affectations, vapours, laziness. I know better now. Forgive me, my hapless brethren, I am as wretched as any one of ye all.

Can anything cure me ?—any medicine for a mind diseased ? James Corrie, what sayest thou ?

“ For any disorder of the brain—any failure of the mental powers—for each and all of these strange forms in which the body will assuredly, in time, take her re-

venge upon those who have given up everything to intellectual pursuits, and neglected the common law of nature—that mind and body should work together, and not apart—I know nothing so salutary as going back to a state of nature, and trying the water cure.”

I sat pondering till midnight. It was a desperate chance, for each day was to me worth so much gold. Yet what mattered that? if each day were to be like this day, I should go insane by Christmas.

At nine a.m., next morning, I stood by my cousin’s bedside, in his chambers at the Albany. He was fast asleep. His large, white, sculptured profile, with the black hair hanging about, was almost ghastly. I sat down, and waited till he awoke.

“Hollo! Alexander! I thought you were a water-demon, waiting to assist me into a bottomless bath, out of which I was to emerge at the South Pole. Well, I’m meditating a similar plunge.”

“I likewise.”

“I am going to try the water cure.”

“So am I.”

“Bravo!” cried he, leaping out of bed. “I am delighted to find there will be two fools instead of one. We’ll start to-morrow.”

“I’m ready.”

CHAPTER II.

“GIVE me the whip, Fyfe. Who would have thought of finding such a place, so near London! That’s a very decent hill; and that moorland wind reminds one of your own Scotland.”

“Ay,” said I, gulping it down—drinking it like a river of life.

The free, keen breeze; the dashing across an unknown country—made dimly visible by a bleak, watery November moon; the odd curves of the road, now shut up by high rocky sides, now bordered by trees, black and ghostly, though still keeping the rounded forms of summer foliage—above all, the country wildness, the entire solitude, when, not two hours ago, we had been in the heart of London. That drive has left a vivid impression on my mind. It always seems like a journey in a

dream. It made a clear division between the former life, and that which was at hand.

I said to myself, in a dreamy sort of way, as, passing under a woody hill-side, the little foot-boy sprang down and opened the lodge-gate, and we drove in front of a lighted hall door, between two white shadowy wings of building—I said, vaguely, “Old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new.”

It is only in the middle of life, or when its burden has become heavier than we can bear, that one comprehends the stretching out of the spirit, as it will yet stretch out of the husk of the body into a fresh existence. It is not till then that we understand the feeling which created the fabled Lethe of Elysium—the full deliciousness of oblivion—the thirsty craving after something altogether new.

Therefore, except to such, I can never explain the ecstasy of impression which this place made upon me, as producing that involuntary cry, “All things are become new.”

Except its master! That is, its real master; for Dr and Mrs Corrie were in the decline of life, and nearly all the burthen of the esta-

blishment fell upon their son, their only child. No, James Corrie, I would not for the world have anything new in thee. Change could not improve thee, nor novelty make thee more grateful to an old friend's heart.

If I were to describe him literally as he stood to welcome us, I fear the effect made would be but small.

He was not a woman's man, my lady readers! He had no smooth blandness, or charming roughness—the two opposite qualities which make the fortune of fashionable physicians. You would hardly take him for a physician at all. His well-built figure; his large, well-balanced head, broad-browed, with a keen intellectual eye, but with a pleasant humanity smiling about the well-turned mouth—all indicated the wholesome balance between the mental, moral, and physical organisation, which made James Corrie, more than any person I have ever known, give one the impression of a true man.

Not a mere poet, or a visionary, or a philosopher, or a follower of science, made up of learning and dry bones, or a man of the world, to whom "the world" was Alpha and Omega;

but a combination of all these, which resulted in that rare character which God meant us every one to be, and which about one-thousandth of us are—a *man*.

Dr James Corrie was about forty. He had married early ; it was an unhappy and childless union. He had now been a widower about five years. I do not know if womankind thought him handsome, but it was a very noble and good face.

“ I like him,” said Austin, decisively, when he had left us in our apartments—a sitting-room dividing two cheerful bedrooms—in each of which the principal feature was a large shallow bath, standing on end in a corner, like a coffin with the lid off.

“ Tea at seven, bed at half-past nine,” I heard Austin maundering drearily to himself, as he brushed his curly hair, and re-attired his very handsome person. “ How the ——. But I suppose one must not swear here—eh, Alick ? Your Dr James is not in that line.”

I laughed ; and we went down stairs.

It was a large, old-fashioned house, baronial-like, with long corridors to pace, and lofty rooms to breathe freely in. Something of

the old feudal blood in me always takes pleasure in that sort of house, especially after London lodgings.

A dazzle of light, coming from a large bright table, of which the prominent ornaments were two vases of winter flowers, and a great silver urn. But abundance of delicate edibles, too; nothing implying future starvation, as Austin indicated by the faintest wink of the eye to me; and then, with an air of satisfaction, resumed his customary gentlemanly deportment.

We were introduced to Mrs Corrie, a tall, spare, elderly lady, who sat, "frosty but kindly," at the head of the table; beside her the old Doctor; at the foot, our friend, Dr James. There was also a Miss Jessie Corrie, a niece, lively and good-looking, though not so young as she might have been. A score of heterogeneous patients, of both sexes and all ages, in which the only homogeneity was a general air of pleasantness and pleasure, completed the circle. Its chief peculiarity seemed, that, large as it was, it had all the unrestrainedness and cosiness of *home*.

"That is exactly what we want to make

it—isn't it, father?" said Dr James, when, the meal over, the Corrie family, and we two, stood round the wide, old-fashioned, faggot-heaped hearth. "We want to cure not only the body, but the mind. To do our patients real good, we must make them happy, and there is no happiness like that of home."

"True," I said, with a sort of sigh.

"And have you not noticed that one half of the chronic valetudinarians we see are those who have either no home, or an unhappy one. To such we try to give, if not the real thing, at least a tolerable imitation of it. And in so doing we double their chances of cure."

"I believe it;" and, turning into the cheery drawing-room, we gave ourselves up—Austin thoroughly, I partially—to the pleasure of being pleased.

"Well," said he, when we retired, "for a sick hospital, this is the jolliest place I ever knew. How do you feel?"

I could hardly tell. I was stupid-like, so great was the change to me, after months of hard work and almost total solitude; besides Corrie and I had been talking over old times.

As I lay dozing, with the glimmer of the fire on the tall, upright, coffin-like bath, there seemed to rise within it a mild, motionless figure, beautiful as a young man's first love, in soft white dead-clothes, with shut eyes, and folded hands, and an inward voice kept repeating my favourite saying—in its simplicity one of the truest and most religious that Shakspeare ever wrote—" 'Tis better as it is."

CHAPTER III.

WE began "the treatment" next day, in a November morning, by the light of a candle. I will not betray the horrors of the prison-house. Of course, it was a trial. My turn over, I could hardly help laughing when I heard afar off the "roar of waters," and Hardy's smothered howl. And when I found him out of doors tramping the hoar frost, and gazing lugubriously over the dim, bleak, misty hills—for it was before sunrise—he, who was usually waked at eleven a.m., to find a valet, silken dressing-gown, coffee, hot rolls, &c. &c., I could not hide an uncontrollable fit of mirth.

He took it good-humouredly; he was a capital fellow; but he shook his head when I proposed to climb the hill-side—the lovely hill-side, with its carpet of fallen leaves, which left still foliage enough to dress the trees, like

Jacob's youngest darling, in a robe of many colours, yellow, brown, red, dark green—I never beheld more glorious hues. Sick and weak as I felt, they stirred my soul to something of its old passion for beauty.

“Very well; so then I must go up the hill alone. It is thirteen years since I saw the country in November; it is fifteen years since I watched the sun rise.”

And on I trudged. I was free! free! I had not to walk as I did in weary London, that the mere motion might stir up some new thoughts in my sluggish brains. Thoughts, not for the mere pleasure of thinking, but that each might be woven out for use, and coined into gold.

My demon, with its two hundred white, blank faces was fifty miles away.

I did not see the sun rise. Who ever did when he climbed for it? But I found a sea of misty moor, sweeping in wave on wave of brown heather—how purple it must once have been!—over which the wind blew in my face, as it used to blow over the hills at home.

I met it—I who two days since had cowered before the slightest draught. My throat

choked, my eyes burned. I walked rapidly on, howling out at the top of my voice fragments out of Victor Hugo's song, "Le Fou de Tolède."

"Gastibelza, l'homme à la carabine
Chantait ainsi :
Quelqu'un a-t-il connu Donna Sabine ?
Quelqu'un d'ici ?
Dansez, chantez, villageois, la nuit gagne
Le mont Falù :—
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
Me rendra fou, oui, me rendra fou !
Dansez, chantez, villageois, la nuit tombe !
Sabine un jour
A tout donnée, sa beauté de colombe,
Et son amour,
Pour l'anneau d'or du Comte de Saldagne,
Pour un bijou—
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
M'a rendu fou, oui, m'a rendu fou."

Breakfast early ; rosy looks ; cheerful greetings ; everybody seeming to take a kindly interest in one another ; the Corrie family taking an interest in each and all ; the wholesome give-and-take system of life's small charities going on around, so that, perforce, strangers joined in the pleasant traffic.

These were my first daylight impressions of Highwood. Austin's seemed the same.

He was busily engaged in doing the agreeable to the bright-eyed Jessie Corrie and three other ladies; his public devotion to the sex being very polytheistic in its tendencies.

I sat aloof and made professional "studies."

"Are these all the patients now with you, Corrie?"

"All but one."

Here I saw Miss Jessie, filling a small tray with comestibles, take a chrysanthemum from the centre vase, and lay it by the toast.

"Ellice likes white chrysanthemums."

"Is Ellice your sister, Miss Corrie?"

"I have none."

"Your cousin, then?"

"No," laughing and giggling; so I concluded it was a man's name, and owned by the invisible patient in whose floral tastes the lady took an interest.

After breakfast, the dining-room was left deserted; everybody had something to do or suffer; we nothing. Stay—nothing, did I say?

Enter John the bath-man.

"Gentlemen, will you please to be ready for me at twelve, and half-past?"

"There's something to suffer, at least," said I, as Austin pulled a long face. Then we settled, he into languid, I into restless dreariness.

"I shall go and smoke, Fyfe."

"And I shall take to my writing."

"I'll sit with you; come along."

I had not meant that, being of those owl-of-the-desert authors who can best ply their trade alone. But there was no help for it. Despite my resolutions, and the *magnum opus* left behind, a miserable restlessness drove me to commence some small operetto, so as anyhow to steal a march upon my enemy, Time.

I was cutting folios preparatively, and inwardly execrating the unwelcome company of my cousin, who puffed gloomily over the fire, when in walked James Corrie.

"Welcome, doctor; take a cigar?"

"Against Highwood rules, my good sir," said Corrie, pleasantly.

"Indeed; but I never kept to a rule in my life. Quite impossible; couldn't give up my cigar."

"So thought I once. Nor my glass of ale. Nor my brandy-and-water at supper-time."

"Yet you did. What cured you?"

"Necessity first. I became a struggling man. I had real wants enough; I could not afford an artificial one. Now cigars cost me, besides a hearty dyspepsia, thirty pounds a-year; and thirty pounds a-year will keep one man, or two children from starving. It seemed a pity in this over-populated country that I should be slowly killing myself with what would save two other human beings alive."

Austin dropped his weed, and paused a little ere he lit another.

"And your strong drinks?"

"Once in my life, Fyfe, I knew what it was to want water."

"When?" asked Austin, lazily, still irresolutely poisoning his unlit Havana.

"Four years ago, on the Atlantic, in an open boat, for five days.

"How many of you?"

"Six men and one woman, all dying of thirst. I have never touched anything but water since."

The doctor became silent. Austin looked at him with a dawning interest. The second cigar still remained in its case.

"Come, Mr Hardy, I am sure, since you have put yourself under my care, you will allow me to confiscate these contraband articles. I belong to the preventive service, you know."

"But, doctor, how am I to drag through the day without my cigar?"

"Leave that to me and mother Nature, or, as our friend here would poetically say, the goddess Undine. By-the-bye, Fyfe, what is this I see? MS.?"

"Only an article I want to finish in the intervals of my courting this said goddess of yours."

"Can't be, my friend; she will not take a divided heart. In her name I must seize all this. Best to be 'off with the auld love before you are on wi' the new.'"

"If Hardy will set the example. Come, old fellow, we have only to fancy ourselves at school again, with James Corrie instead of Birch for our Tyrannus. Let's submit."

"I know it will be the death of me," groaned Austin. But he met the doctor's cheerful, comical smile, and smiled too. Somehow the cigar-case vanished, likewise

my MS., and I rather think the two great pockets of Corrie's shooting-jacket entombed both.

Making no more remarks on the subject, he continued talking; upon common topics, the Eastern war, Highwood, its neighbourhood, and lastly, its inmates.

"What odd varieties of humanity must come under your hands, doctor. How ever do you manage to guide, control, and amalgamate them all?"

"By two simple rules—the law of truth and the law of kindness. Sick people are not unlike children." Here we both slightly winced, but the doctor took no notice. "Have we not high authority for trying to become 'as little children?' That, it seems to me, is the principle of the water cure; that is how I strive to carry it out."

"You certainly succeed. I have rarely beheld more cheerful and happy faces. It is quite a treat to look round at meal times. We have seen all the patients, I think you said?"

"Except the one I mentioned."

"Who was that?"

"Miss Ellice Keir,"

"I have heard about her," said Austin, languidly. "Something in your line, Fyfe; the high, heroic dodge. For my part, I don't fancy your middle-aged, strong-minded, self-devoted females."

"Miss Keir would be as much surprised as any one of her friends to hear herself put under that category. Indeed, Mr Hardy, you quite mistake," said the doctor, quietly.

"What is she, then?"

"She has been, and still is, a great sufferer."

Something extra-professional and dignified in Corrie suppressed my cousin. Besides, he was too kind-hearted to make game of any "great sufferer."

But when our medico was gone, I scrupled not to question what Austin had heard about the "high, heroic dodge."

"It might come in, you know. Any scrap of an idea is valuable to such addled brains as mine. I might put her into my next book."

"Do you put people in your books?" said Austin, with an open mouth of slight alarm.

"Never, my good fellow. That is, never *in toto*, never to their injury, and never when I think they would dislike it. I only make studies of 'bits,' heads and feet, noses and eyes, as a painter would. I wouldn't 'show up' anybody. It's mean. But," for I saw I was talking miles over Austin's head, "what of Ellice Keir?"

"She is an American."

"Stop! a Yankee? Then I don't wish to hear another word."

CHAPTER IV.

No, it was useless trying to get up an interest in anybody or anything. Chronic ill health of mind, or body, or both, is not cured in a day.

True the charm of change lasted for some eight-and-forty hours or so, and I began greatly to enjoy the morning bath, the moorland walk to meet the sun, the cheery breakfast, where food tasted well, and one was not afraid to eat; where conversation was pleasant, and one did not tremble to use one's brains, nor to waste in mere talk the thoughts which were one's stock in trade, valuable as bullion gold.

But as the day crept on all this brightness faded, and life became as dull and pale as it was everywhere to me.

And still in solitary walks, amid the soft droppings or wild whirlings of dead leaves,

and the rustle of the dying fern ; in the still deeper solitude of parlour circles, merry and loud, I found myself moodily and cynically commenting, with the preacher, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," And out of the intolerable weight, the leaden-folded cloak, which seemed to wrap me round, or else to hang like a pall between me and all creation, —sometimes, at twitter of a bird, or sound of moorland wind, or hand-breadth of rosy, winter sunset lighting up the dull sky, I used to stretch out my hands, longing to sob out like a child, yet able only to sigh, "Oh, for the dreams of my youth !"

For Austin, he succeeded better. His soul did not trouble him much, or the dreams of his youth either. His fine animal nature responded to this uncorrupt animal existence. He grew rapidly better, and lived apparently a very jolly life, though at intervals still complaining of its being so "slow."

CHAPTER V.

I SAT by the dining-room fire, alone, for it was the forenoon. Let me draw the picture of that day.

A gloomy day. True November; damp and raw. The terrace and the lawn was strewn with dead leaves; and more kept falling, fluttering down one by one, like shot birds. The only bit of warm colour the eye could seize on was a tall cedar, between whose branches shone a beech-tree beyond, making alternate lines of dark-red and dark-green. Every day at breakfast I used to look at it, often thinking, childish fashion, that if I had to choose a vegetable existence I should like to be a beech, with its ever-moving leaves, so vocal in their prime, so rich in hue, to the very minute that they fall.

Maundering thus, I went "mooning" up and down the empty room, my hands in my pockets, thinking how long it was since I

had been a child—wondering whether in the next form of existence I should be a child again.

Hark! a harmonium! I did not know there was one in the house. In the next room, probably. Somebody playing it well, too.

Now, I do not care for music in general—not the music one gets “in society.” It is too flimsy for me. The love-songs sicken me; the sad, plaintive songs, badly sung, are atrocious; well sung, they tear one’s heart; and at thirty, one begins to find that a very unnecessary piece of laceration.

“What is life, that we should moan—
Why make we such ado?”

In heaven’s name, troll a merry stave and have done with it. As for piano-forte playing, I had rather hear my aunt’s kitten run over the keys—at least almost always.

But I like an organ; and, second best, a harmonium. I liked this one. Corrie found me pacing up and down, or listening, rapt, in a state bordering on sublimest satisfaction.

“What a lovely tone—calm, liquid, grand! Dreamy, too—like the dreams of one’s youth, with all the passion and pain burnt out of them. How exquisitely smooth and delicate the touch; and it isn’t easy, for I have tried—listen.”

“Yes—she plays very well.”

“Who is it, Doctor?”

“Miss Keir.”

“Miss Keir! She with her Yankee fingers and Yankee soul!”

“My good friend, you mistake; even if Yankee were the terrible adjective you make it, which I beg leave to deny, having myself a great respect for brother Jonathan. But Miss Keir is a Canadian. She was born at Montreal. Come, I will introduce you.”

We entered—a lady rose from the instrument; a very little lady, almost elfishly small; hands and feet so tiny, you would have crushed them with a touch. Dressed in black, of some soft material that did not rustle, but caused her to move softly and airily, without a sound. She was neither young nor handsome in the least; but—and that “but”

contradicts both assertion—she had very dark Canadian eyes.

I say Canadian, because I have only seen them in Canadians by birth or descent. They are neither eastern nor southern, neither fiery nor voluptuous; but large, soft, calm, swimming and trembling in a tender passionateness, or breaking at times into a flash of the wild Indian blood—worth all your placid, pale-coloured English eyes!

“Mr Fyfe—Miss Keir. He is a very old friend of mine.”

Miss Keir offered her hand, her little pale hand, soft as a bit of snow, only it was so warm.

Now, that is one of my crotchets—the *feel* of a hand. Some it is martyrdom to me to touch. I hate your fishy, your skinny, your dumpling, your flabby hands—a hand that is afraid—a hand that clutches. I like a woman who comes and lays her soft, pure palm in mine, knowing I am a man and a gentleman, that I prize the little passing angel, and will entertain it honourably and well.

Another crotchet I have—the tone, *i.e.*—

timbre of a voice. Venus herself would be intolerable to me if she had the voice of some women I have known. A voice is the test of character—you can detect at once the true ring in it, or the false; of temper—however education and the decorums of society may soften it down—in critical moments, out it comes. I think I never yet knew a thoroughly loveable woman who had an ugly voice.

Miss Keir's voice was beautiful. Among other women it sounded like a thrush's note among a congregation of sparrows—as rare too. Yet her manner and looks were so expressive, so *spirituelle*; nay, rather let me use the English word spiritual; for that more truly indicates the way in which her soul seemed to be shining through and glorifying her little frail body—that she required language less than most women.

We had all three a very long conversation. We dashed at once in *medias res*—tried our several hands at solving some of the great world-questions of our day—some of the greatest problems of the universe. We grew earnest, excited—that is, I did—then calm.

She calmed me. What she said, I know not. I cannot tell if she explained anything, because the most formidable of our spiritual, like our physical mysteries, are utterly incapable of explanation; but she calmed me down—like as a man in great mental anguish is quieted by being suddenly brought out into the open daylight, the summer air.

I have great faith in instinctive attraction and repulsion. I believe there are people—I am one—who know at first meeting whom they will love and whom they will hate—who will do them harm, and who good. I believe this sensation is placed in them for warning and guidance. I myself have never run counter to it, except to my after peril.

It was blindly obeying this attraction, when, on leaving, I requested permission sometimes to join the Corries in Miss Keir's apartment.

She looked at the doctor; he answered, smiling—"You are so much better now, that you may safely be allowed a little society—especially that of so celebrated a literary character as my friend Mr Fyfe."

Literature!—faugh! I had forgotten the very word.

“Why did you tell her I was an author?” I said, as we turned out of doors; Corrie remorselessly exacting the walk before the noon-day bath. “Why could you not let me stand for once upon my own footing; let her judge me not by what I do, but what I am. Yet”—and a bitter conviction of what a contemptible specimen of manhood I had sunk to, forced itself upon my mind—“Yet, a hard judgment that might have been.”

“Not from her. She knows that some characters, sorely tried, must be judged, not solely from what they are, but from what they aspire to be—and one day may be. Why should I have kept *incog.* your best self—your books? She has read them all.”

“Has she? I am sorry. No—glad. For after all, with all my shams, she will find the real Alexander Fyfe by snatches there. But enough of myself. I want to talk about her.”

“You seem greatly pleased with her. Yet few take to her at once, she is so very quiet.”

“But her quietness gives one a sense of rest, and her soft way of moving throws a harmony over the room. She is not unlike the instrument she plays. You cannot fancy her attuned to the drawing-room ditties and ball-room jigs of life—you cannot conceive of her either beautiful or young.”

The Doctor silently smiled.

“I mean, there is in her that which transcends both youth and beauty—a cheerful sacredness—a wholesome calm. She seems to do me good. I should like to know more of her.”

“That is very easy, if her health keeps improving.”

“Has she been long an invalid?”

“Four years.”

“How did you meet her?”

“Literally, at the gates of death. In the boat I told you of, after our ship went down——”

“Was she that one woman saved?”

“She was. She had a brother and sister with her, bringing them to Europe. I got them into the boat. For six days she was the strength of us all. Then the little sister died on her lap. The brother survived.”

James Corrie cleared his throat; we walked on a few yards—

“Such a quiet creature—who would have believed it of her?”

“Nobody does, and nobody need; such deeds are not done for the world, and she has been quite as heroic—if you will use the word—in her illness since, as at the time of the shipwreck.”

“How is she affected?”

“With almost constant neuralgic and rheumatic pains; it is only within the last few months that she has been able to walk—or even to stand.”

“And the brother?”

“He is walking the hospitals in Edinburgh. She struggled on with him for six months till she fell ill—fortunately in my mother’s house. She has never quite recovered.”

“Do you think she ever will recover?”

“Certainly. That is—if it be the will of God. Now, Fyfe, your hour is come—to the ‘dripping-sheet’—away!”

I left him; and he walked rapidly up the hill.

CHAPTER VI.

"SMALL — plain — and not young! Very attractive description, truly. But the patients here seem all middle aged. What with baths and walks to cut up the day, and your friend Corrie to look after one, what with his awfully honest, righteous eyes, one can't get the least bit of harmless amusement."

"Except with Miss Jessie. You flirt enough with her."

"Put that verb in the passive voice—do, my good fellow. I merely respond. What a wild devil it is—just like pepper and mustard—French mustard. It's the only bit of spice left in your terribly wholesome hydropathic diet. I might amuse myself really with it if it were only young."

"*Le besoin de s'amuser*, seems the only possible element in your affairs of this sort."

"Exactly so."

And he sauntered back into the drawing-room, where, our aquatic duties all done, there was usually a most merry circle till bed time. Into which circle my friend Hardy had dropped like a god-send, and even by his third night made himself acceptable to everybody there, and especially to Miss Jessie Corrie.

Yet I had no qualms on her account; if, indeed, I could have felt enough interest in life to suffer qualms about anything. The lady was—like Isopel, in Borrow's "Lavengro" (you see, unlike many authors, I do read other books besides my own)—"large and fierce, and able to take her own part." I did not think she had a heart; anyhow, it did not matter it's being broken—most people's are; else where would all the poems and novels come from?

"As you will, my good friends," thought I, watching them lounging, flirting, and laughing. "It's a case of diamond cut diamond. Skim away over life's shallows in your painted jolly-boats. You'll swamp no one—not even each other; or, if you did, it's no business of mine."

But just at that minute I paused—I caught a tone of the harmonium down stairs.

“Now,” thinks I to myself, “I wonder what those eyes down below would say if they were looking on instead of mine. Would they have my cynicism—my contemptuous *laissez-faire*? But ‘Physician, heal thyself!’ How can I be bold enough to pull the mote out of another’s eye, when I am still blinded by the beam in my own. Blinder than ever—or else coming into the light makes me feel it more—since morning.”

Our fourth day at Highwood—and Sunday ; Austin escorted a carriage-full of ladies to church—he thought it more “respectable.” For me——

Oh, thou one Father of the universe—one infinite and unapproachable Wisdom—one all-satisfying and all-perfect Love—when wilt Thou visit me?—when wilt Thou enlighten me? when wilt Thou comfort me? I stand under the pine-wood on the hill-top, where the air is so rare, and the wind so wild—it seems nearer to Thee. I long to die and learn Thy mysteries—to die and be

filled with Thy love. My soul cries out unto Thee with an exceeding great and bitter cry — which is often the only evidence it has of its own existence. I do not believe in myself at all—my worthless, aimless, broken-spirited, miserable self; but I believe in Thee.

“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” But only the fool; or, perhaps, he who pays a guinea toll to heaven on a silver charity-plate, or keeps a bishop to pray for him. To-day, I prefer the hill-top, and Parson Breeze.

Descending the hill, I met Corrie, and went in with him to speak to Miss Keir. He told her what I had been saying.

She pointed to a line she had been setting as a copy for the lodge-keeper’s lame daughter, whom she usually taught to write of a Sunday:—

“In every place, he that *loveth God*, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of Him.”

That was the best sermon after all. That was what the Divine Preacher on the mount would have said to us, Ellice Keir!

CHAPTER VII.

“WATER-CURE! I think, Doctor, your system is directed not only to the body, but the soul. Mine feels cleaner than of yore.”

“Does it?”

We were pacing the terrace walk—Miss Keir and Miss Jessie watching us from the window. It had become a matter of custom that I should always spend a morning hour or two in her room. They were the best hours of the day.

“What a calm, clear mind hers is—purified by suffering, full of inward faith. How she looks through all shams right down into divine Truth. Like—if the simile were not as hackneyed as Piccadilly in May—like a steady-eyed astronomer looking down into a well. We see only the glaring noon without, or the black encrusted sides: she

sees the stars at the bottom. She knows where to look for them, because *she believes they are there.*"

"You are quite poetical again."

"Yes, I think I could write my book, if you would let me."

The Doctor shook his head.

"And sometimes I could almost fancy that Alexander Fyfe's boy-heart was only buried, with the old Knight's under that sun-dial, and that a trifle of digging would bring it to the surface again—slightly decayed, perhaps, but a human heart still."

"Are you thinking of marrying?" said the Doctor, very gravely.

"No; nor of loving, in that sense. It isn't in me. But simply of resuscitating from fast corruption that aforesaid portion of human anatomy, which we authors trade in so much that we leave no material for home use."

"Do speak plainly; I am but a plain man."

"For the which thank Heaven! Merely, Corrie, that we authors are liable, above most people, to the danger that, while preaching to others, ourselves should become castaways. We

persuade ourselves that to paint high virtue is to exemplify it. We like to act leader and chorus, instead of principal—to talk rather than to work. In brief, we write when we ought to live.”

“Possibly. But what are you driving at?”

“This. Here have I been lauding up the ideal these thirteen years; have scribbled folios on moral power, heroism, self-denial, and that sort of thing.”

“You have, indeed; your writings are beautiful.”

“My *writings*! And what am I? A self-engrossed, sickly, miserable, hypochondriacal fool.”

“My dear fellow!”

“It is true! And that woman, Ellice Keir, who never wrote a line in all her days, she lives a poem. Such a one as in all *my* days I will never be able to write.”

“I’ll tell her what you say,” answered the Doctor, smiling. “Come along.”

He told her, almost word for word. She looked in his face, and blushed up to the eyes—a vivid, tremulous, happy blush.

“Mr Fyfe is quite mistaken, you know.”

“I know he is mistaken in one thing. We need only judge ourselves, as we trust we shall be judged, according to our gifts. He whose gifts it is to write great books, though himself far below his own ideal, is, when not false to it in his life, a means of ennobling other lives ; and though to my mind a great life is nobler than any book, still to have written a great book is—to have done something. Never let a rose-bush despise itself because it is not an oak.”

“Yes,” Miss Keir added, her eyes turning from Dr James to me, “it should rather abide in peace, and grow to the utmost perfection its own roses. They are very dear and sweet.”

She held out her hand. It was better to me than a laurel crown.

Henceforward I began truly *to live*: the first time I had lived for years. Up ere daylight, instead of that stupor of body and soul which used to last till near mid-day. The baths—out of which one comes merry as a child and strong as a Hercules. The walks—clasping nature like a mistress ; nature, always lovely and beloved, even when she pelted me with rain-

storms, frowned at me through leaden skies, soaked me with her soft, perpetual tears.

I will not say what it was to be, every day, and many hours in the day, under the heavenly darkness of light—if I may coin the paradox—of the eyes of Ellice Keir.

She never grew, in mine, any younger or any handsomer; in truth, I hardly thought of her physical self at all. It was a pure, abstract recognition of my ideal of moral beauty—more perfect than in any woman I have ever known.

Pardon, pardon, O first love of my youth! Thine eyes are closed—closed!

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CHAPTER VIII.

“WELL, if you ask me for my opinion (I don’t think one man has a right to give it to another man—hardly even one friend to another friend, without)—I consider you are not acting like that most sensible, upright, gentlemanly youth I knew ten years ago—Austin Hardy.”

“Pshaw! don’t bring up ten years ago. Our virtues wear out like our clothes. We can’t go shabby. Best get another suit.”

“But let it be, at least, as decent as the former.”

“If it can, *i. e.* if there’s any cash to get it with. But let’s talk plain English. What have you to say? Do you think I shall get into a scrape?”

“Not a bit of it. Miss Jessie is a wise one, and a sharp one, too. She isn’t the least likely to break her heart for you. She only coquettes a little.”

“Mighty little. Your friend the Doctor keeps such a steady look out, one would think he wanted her for himself. Then the old people; I suppose it's their duty to watch black sheep for the credit of their establishment. Never was there a fellow who had so few opportunities of love-making, even if he chose. But I don't choose. I only want to amuse myself.”

“That is—you find yourself in a world where people live, work, struggle; and all you can do to amuse yourself! Tired of all other shams, you put on the largest sham of all—the highest, strongest feeling a human being can have—love, just ‘to amuse yourself.’”

“You're civil, Alexander.”

“I'm honest.”

“Don't fly into a passion; you know I always listen to you. Why did you not give me this sermon a week ago?”

“Why, indeed!”

“There's something changed about you, my boy. You don't talk such rigmarole as you used to do, nor in such a savage tone. Also, you look quieter—not so nervous. You will grow into a ‘show case,’ as our friend

Corrie would say. It is really the water-cure."

"Probably. But never mind me. I'm talking about you, and Miss Jessie likewise. Mark me, Austin, that young woman——"

"Hold there. Middle-aged. Thirty-one, at least; else I might have thought seriously of her—for a quarter of an hour. She is a good figure, large and lady-like—very decent requisites for Mrs Hardy. More I can't expect. Well, what about 'that young woman?'"

"Merely, that she never had any heart at all; or, if she had, she has worn it on her sleeve, till the daws have pecked it away."

"Just like mine."

"I wonder you'll even condescend to play at folly—still worse, at mock sentiment, with her. She who is all false, from top to toe, without and within."

"Heigho! So am I."

"You're not, Austin Hardy. You think it fine to sham vice; you're too lazy to struggle through to virtue; but you're an honest fellow at heart."

"Hold your tongue, Alick," said he, in a

gruff voice. "Here comes the lovely young Jessie. Welcome! She is just in time to spread her petals to the sunrise, my fair Flower of Dumblane."

For—and let me premise that this is a most original scene for a tryste, and quite peculiar to a hydropathic establishment—I ought to have said that we were taking our morning walk, all things being yet dusky, in the cloudy winter dawn. Though in the east, and up even to the zenith, the sky was catching a faint rosy tinge; and between the two pine-woods one vivid sulphur-coloured cloud showed that somewhere, far below the visible horizon, the sun was beginning to shine.

I maintain, from personal experience at Highwood, that sunrise in general is what a schoolboy would call "a great humbug"—"a dead take in." But still it has a peculiarity of its own, especially on a winter morning. The worthy old sun seems to climb up so doggedly pertinacious, so patiently strong, though shorn of his beams—struggling through mist and damp to smile upon a poor earth, who is too weary, ragged, and wan, to welcome him. But steadily he rises—like a high

honest purpose dawning in the hopeless winter of a man's days, when time is short and weather bleak; yet steadily he rises, and comes at last to day-break—daylight—ay, unto perfect noon-day.

I began to think sometimes on this wise—as if even though it was but yesterday that I had sat and watched my sun go down—watched stoically, with open eyes that never blenched or moistened; yet every morning at this hour, it seemed as if it *might* rise to-morrow.

And Austin?

CHAPTER IX.

“BLESS my life! Is that your wonderful Miss Keir? What a very plain woman.”

It was her first appearance in the evening circle, and I had offered Hardy to introduce him. Of course, receiving this reply, I immediately turned, and left him to his own devices.

A “plain woman,” was she? Perhaps. I could not tell; I had scarcely thought about it. If I did now, it was only vaguely—thinking of an observation once made on a lady, a friend of mine. Its object told it me herself, with a simple, grateful pleasure, touched even to tears: “He said, he never knew whether I was pretty or not; he only knew that he loved me.”

And I loved Ellice Keir, in that sort of harmless way, with a tender friendship which, when both are well advanced in life, so as to make it safe and free, it does a man good to

bestow, and is sweet for a woman to receive. So I reasoned. Oh! fool, fool, fool!

She sat in the fireside arm-chair, the same little black-stoled figure, the sound of whose voice was seldom heard, yet whose mute smile created around her a circle of brightness. Sun-like, she appeared to draw from the various calyx of every human heart some perfume—usually the best perfume it had.

Gradually nearly all the party gathered around her; and a few stragglers only were left apart, including Hardy and Miss Corrie. At last I heard him behind me.

“How glad every body seems to have Miss Keir back here again.”

“That is not wonderful.”

“There is a general seceding to her. I suppose I must e’en follow the herd. Come, you may introduce me, if you like.”

“By no means. How could you be expected to do the civil to such ‘a very plain woman?’”

“’Pon my life, and so she is. But there’s something odd about her. Those eyes—I felt them at the farthest corner of the room. They seem to be finding me out. Confess—

have you been telling her any of my misdeeds?"

"Austin Hardy!"

"Well, it would not be like you. Now for it; lead the victim to the horns of the altar. I'm prepared."

But Miss Keir was already retiring. A mere introduction passed—no more.

"Ah!" said Austin, drawing a deep breath, and giving me a slight wink, as Miss Jessie came on in full sail up to the chair where he was lounging. "No matter; I shall go back to my old silly ways. It's easier, now that woman is out of the room."

Hardy held out for one evening—two—the beginning of the third; said she was clever, and he hated clever women; quiet, and he liked to be amused. Afterwards, I saw him listening, with polite, abstracted smile, to the large dose of "amusement" Miss Jessie always furnished; but his eyes were rivetted on the fire-side circle, now a brighter circle than ever, since Miss Keir was its centre. No, not its centre; for her attraction in society was more of the passive kind. She did not shine herself, but she created a fresh, clear atmosphere, in

which every one else shone brighter than before. Finally, Hardy was discovered leaning behind the velvet arm-chair, attentive to the discussion. It was something about Northumberland mines, and the improvement of the miners.

“Miss Keir is speaking to you, Mr Hardy.”

It was really droll to see him bend forward with that eager, pleased face, to “such a very plain woman.”

“Yes, my property does lie among the mining country, but I never troubled my head much about it. I have had no time.”

“No time?”

“That is, I fear I have never had energy enough to make time. I am a very lazy fellow, as Fyfe would tell you.”

She smiled again, and said something more which I did not hear. Austin brightened up.

“Ay, my cousin has always a good word for me; but, indeed, I am not fit for anything of the sort. I couldn’t take the trouble. My property is the greatest burden of my life.”

Here Jessie Corrie tittered out some very commonplace remark, to which he replied

with one of his usual fulsome speeches to women; but still kept talking to Miss Keir—

“Duties of property did you say? Dreadful word, ‘duty!’ Quite out of my line. Besides, it’s too late now. With my ill-health——”

Here he seemed conscious of her amused look resting on his brawny figure and ruddy face—

“Well, I fear you and the Doctor must find out a better man for the carrying out of your philanthropic plans. I have been too long given up to the do-nothing system.”

Yet he lingered and listened, gradually with some real interest gleaming through his elegant languor; now and then joining in the conversation with a word or two of the capital good sense he could furnish at will, though he was not cursed to any heavy degree with that commodity called “brains.” At parting, Miss Keir shook hands with him, with a friendly word or two.

“By Jove, Fyfe, that isn’t a bad sort of woman, just for a change. I’m rather tired of beauties. One is obliged to think before one speaks to her, just as if she were a man.”

"Her sex is indebted to you."

"Pshaw! she is not a bit of a woman."

"Altogether a woman, I think."

"Well, have your own way."

He stood long meditating, a rare fact for Austin Hardy.

"There is some sense in those schemes of hers. When I was twenty-one I used to have grand notions about improving my estates, and living patriarch of the countryside, after the good old fashion. But all vanished in smoke. It's too late now."

"No good thing is ever too late. Did you not hear her saying so? She thinks you might carry out many of the Doctor's sanitary and educational schemes. She told me she wished you would."

"Did she? But I have not the power, and it isn't worth while. Let the world jog on as it likes, it will last my time. However, perhaps I may just hear what she says on the subject to-morrow."

I smiled to myself, and was satisfied.

"By-the-bye, Alick, I altogether forgot to bid good-night to Jessie Corrie."

Substitution is the true theory of amend-

ment. Knock a rotten substance out by driving a sound wedge in.

So thought I, when two days after, I saw Austin making himself busy—at least as busy as a man can well be who is going through the water treatment—in this new interest, which perhaps was the only real interest he was capable of. It roused his best self—that for which nature intended him—the active, upright, benevolent country gentleman.

He took to plans, drawings, blue-books, works on political economy, and spent half the morning in that little parlour I so loved, with Dr James Corrie and Miss Keir.

The former said to me, watching him—

“Here’s a change in our friend Mr Hardy. I fancy he, too, is participating in the spiritual water-cure.”

“It appears so.”

Nor did I grudge him that healing.

CHAPTER X.

It was a November day—November, yet so mild, so sunshiny, so heavenly calm, that but for the thinned trees, the brown heather, the withered fern, you would have thought it spring.

Her pony's feet were up to the fetlock in dead beech-leaves, making a soft rustle as we climbed the hill after her. We—that is, Miss Corrie, Hardy, Dr James, and I. The old Dr Corrie and his wife were a good way behind. They, too, had made a point of joining the triumphant procession which celebrated Miss Keir's return to the outer world; for everybody loved her—everybody!

She seemed to know and feel it—to sun herself in it almost as a child does. For, though thirty years old, there was still in her a great deal of the child. Trouble had passed

over her, ripening, not blasting, and left her in the Indian summer of her days, a season almost as beautiful as spring. In that golden brightness, one of us at least lived, morning, noon, and eve, and half believed it was the return of May.

"This day seems made on purpose for you, Miss Keir," said Austin, as he struggled up the hill, assisting Miss Jessie kindly and courteously (perhaps more kindly and courteously than ever since his manner had gradually sunk to that and nothing more). The lady looked cross, and complained of damp leaves. In her was nothing of the Indian summer, but an affectation of girlishness, a frantic clinging to a lost youth, which is at once the saddest and most hateful thing I know.

"Eight hours since, when Hardy and I took our morning walk, this moor was all white with hoar frost. Are you quite sure you are not cold, Miss Keir?"

"Let me run and get her my fur cape, Alick. Will you help Miss Corrie for a minute or two?"

"Mr Hardy is certainly better; he has

learnt to run like any school-boy," said the Doctor, with an amused satisfaction.

"And to fetch and carry like any spaniel," observed Miss Jessie Corrie, whose regard cooling down, gave out a satirical spark or two occasionally. "Marvellous change! A month ago, he thought of nobody in the world but his dearly-beloved self."

"He was ill then," I said.

Laughing at my sharpness, she bent forward to a whisper of Miss Keir's, which she repeated aloud with variations afterwards.

"Mr Hardy, Ellice is much obliged. She says you run like a school-boy, and carry like a spaniel, and have learned at last to think of other folk in the house besides your beloved self."

"Did she say so?"

That hurt look on Austin's *blasé* visage was something new—new as the odd shyness with which he gave the fur to me to wrap her in—he, the erewhile officious squire of dames!

Ellice turned on him her bright, true, heart-satisfying smile.

"Jessie mistakes a little. I said that

Mr Hardy thinks of everybody in the house except himself."

Austin showed that he could not only run, but blush like any school-boy; so pleasant seemed her praise.

On we went through the moorland, down in the ferny dell where those three cedars stood, huge and dark, with the faint sunbeams on their tops, and damp earthiness at their feet.

"This will not do," said Dr James. "Very unsanitary spot. There's a wholesome breeze and a grand view half way up Torbury Hill."

So we ascended, knee-deep in heather, in which poor Miss Jessie was stranded. Austin took her safely home, and came "tearing" back, his hair flying all abroad, and his clothes catching on furze-bushes. How his London friends would have stared! I told him so.

"Never mind. You are growing just as much of a boy yourself, old fellow. I think, Miss Keir, it must be something in the air of Highwood that makes one young."

He might have said, only he never made

one of his pretty speeches to her, that she herself furnished no exception to the rule. For, in truth, her cheek had a girlish rosi-ness; a tint like the inside leaves of those delicate, peach-coloured chrysanthemums she was so fond of.—I think—oh, contemptibly-sentimental thought!—I would like to have my grave planted with chrysanthemums. They come so cheerful and fair in the winter time, and they always remind me of High-wood and of Ellice Keir. She once said, they looked like a handful of happiness gathered when one is growing old.

But we all eschewed age to-day—ay, even the Doctor, whose general gravity was such, that most of the patients looked upon him as more antiquated and réverend than his father. He threw off his antiquity now. He strode through the heather, led the pony, pointed out the sunset. He had always the keenest sense of natural beauty; his large grey eye softened and brightened as it turned on Ellice Keir.

“How strange, how sad it must be to have to seek out God in nature! To us, all nature is but an emanation from God.”

I listened. He and she together—Christian man and Christian woman—had said some sweet, Christ-like words to me ere this; better still, had *lived* before me. It seemed strange now that I had ever cried out in that temporary insanity of unbelief with which this history begins. I stood “clothed and in my right mind.” It will be imagined the sort of feeling with which I often looked, as to-day, from one face to the other—what calm, noble, blessed faces they were!—especially hers.

Austin did the same. He had a great kindness for the Doctor; and as for Miss Keir——

“Do you know,” he said, stepping closer to her saddle, “this place is curiously like Netherlands. The country-side is all barren moor, just as this, dotted with tumble-down huts, where those brutes of riotous miners live. Ah! you smile. It shall not be so another year. Indeed, it shall not, Miss Keir. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Bravo! What you can do, will be no little, Mr Hardy.”

“Thank you, Doctor. And there, behind

just such a fir-wood as that, the house stands. Poor old Netherlands, I have not been there these ten years. It is getting sadly dilapidated, my steward tells me—but then it's his interest to tell me lies—they all do. What were you saying, Miss Keir?"

He bent forward to hear her.

"I never thought of that," he answered, deprecatingly. Bless me, it never struck me my laziness was harming anybody but myself; but for the future, I promise, and Fyfe knows I never break my promise. Doctor, you may well cry 'Bravo!' There's a good star rising over poor old Netherlands. You must come and see me there."

Then, in a lower tone—

"Will you come too, Miss Keir?"

She hesitated, coloured slightly, or I fancied so; finally, gave a smiling assent. Austin thanked her, and stood looking towards the fir-wood, that lay in a black bank under the sunset.

"Poor old Netherlands—dear old Netherlands!" he murmured more than once, in the soft tone he had used years ago, when talking to my little sister, Mary.

I also, was young then. Heavens! what is it to be young!

"Oh, my youth—my youth!" cried out *my* heart too, and seemed to catch at its last gleaming, even as each wave of moor, each stump of tree caught at the sun as he was going down, with a wild clutch, as knowing that this glimmer was, indeed, the last—that afterwards there would be nothing but gloom. But he went down, and it was light still.

"This is the strangest winter evening," I said. "It will not grow dark. Did you ever see such a dainty, bright new moon?"

"We must go home for all that," insisted the Doctor—smiling.

"Not yet—just one minute longer, Miss Keir."

I put my arm on her pony's neck. I could not see her face, but a fold or two of her gown—just enough to feel she was there. I fancied I heard her sigh. No wonder—everything was so still and beautiful.

For me, my sigh was almost a sob. My soul was come into me again. I was no longer a wretched clod, passionless, brainless.

I could feel, enjoy, create; I was again an author, a poet—greater yet, I was a man.

“Oh, thank God, this is like my youth! And I am young—I am only thirty-two. I might live my life out yet.”

“Live it!” said the brave, kind voice of James Corrie.

“Live it!” said the silent smile of Ellice Keir.

“I will!”

Though the vow was then taken somewhat in blindness of what was, and was to come, still, God be witness, I shall never break it either to Him—or these.

CHAPTER XI.

"I'VE done it, Alick—I thought I could."

And Hardy, after a three days' absence—I supposed in London—burst into our sitting-room, a huge peripatetic snow-drift.

"Done what?"

"I forgot—you don't know yet. But I'll tell you in a minute, when I'm not out of breath."

"Did you come in by the six o'clock train, to-night?"

"Surely."

"Nobody expected you. You must have had to walk across the country."

"Of course I did."

"Tell it not at the Albany, lest Highwood should be inundated with a flood of bachelors seeking the water-cure! That I should have lived to see Austin Hardy, Esquire, taking

a four-mile night-walk through a heavy Christmas snow !”

“Pshaw, don’t make game of a fellow; it’s only what a man ought to do, if he’s anything like a man.”

He certainly looked every inch “a man.” His languid affectations, his fashionable drawl, were gone. Even his dress—that Stultzian toilet once rivalling *the* Count himself—was now paid no more attention to than any decent gentleman is justified in paying. His hair frizzled, guiltless of Macassar; as for his oils and his perfumes, the water-cure seemed to have washed them all away. Altogether he was a very fine fellow indeed—in the physical line. My own small corporeality shrunk into insignificance beside him.

But I had been sitting for two hours looking direct into those eyes, which looked as steadily into mine, in bright and friendly communion—those eyes which always sent a deep peace, a quiet rest down to the very bottom of my soul. No; I did not envy Austin Hardy.

“Now, my good fellow, when you have

shaken off your snow, sit down and inform me of this mighty deed.

"Oh, it's nothing—a mere nothing," with that air of positive shyness, which was in him so new and so comical. "First, is all well at Highwood?"

"Certainly. You surely did not expect any great internal convulsions to happen here in three days?"

"No; but when one is away, you know, one fancies things. How deliciously quiet this place seems, after knocking about for some hundreds of miles."

"Some hundreds of miles! Why, where have you been?"

"To Edinburgh."

"To Edinburgh. You who grumble at a fifty miles' journey. In this snow, too. What important business dragged you there?"

"Oh, none. Only I thought I ought." (The amusing novelty of Austin Hardy's doing an unpleasant thing because he ought!) "I went to see young Harry Keir."

I was very much astonished.

"You see," he added, poking the fire hard, "I couldn't bear her sad looks, when the

young fellow, and his doubtful prospects, were mentioned. He is a real fine fellow—only wants giving a start in life, and he'd get on like a house on fire. Now, last week a thought struck me——”

“Will you kindly leave off striking showers of fir-wood sparks into my face?”

“I didn't like telling her beforehand, lest, if it failed, she should be disappointed. She loves that lad—though, by-the-bye, he isn't exactly a lad; he took his doctor's degree this year, and is mighty clever, too—Heigho! She is very fond of him and he of her. And by Jove, so he ought to be.”

“But you have not yet told me—that is, if you were going to tell me——”

“Certainly, though there's little to tell. Merely, that I went to Edinburgh, found out the young man; then hunted up my friend, Lord C——, who is starting to Italy with his sick son. A tolerable hunt, too—followed him first to Yorkshire, and then to Bath. But, it's all settled now. Keir is appointed travelling physician at £200 a-year. Not a bad notion—eh, Alick? The young fellow is so glad—it quite does one good to think of him.”

"Does she know?"

"Of course not."

"How happy she will be."

And it was he who had the power to give her this happiness! For the first time in my life I envied Austin Hardy.

"When shall you tell her?"

"I don't know—I—I wish *you* would, Fyfe. You would do it so much better than I."

"No—no."

CHAPTER XII.

I WAS present when she was told—told in an awkward, unintelligible, and even agitated fashion, which no one would have expected from that finished gentleman, Mr Austin Hardy.

She looked from one to the other of us vaguely. “I don’t understand.”

Hardy repeated the information—just the bare fact of her brother’s appointment, which young Keir himself would confirm to-morrow.

She believed at last, asking pardon for her doubt. “But,” with that rare tear, which showed how many could have, or had once flowed down her dear face, “Harry and I are not used to being so happy.”

No more than this. Nothing in her of the tragic commodity—nothing that professional passion-mongers like me could study a scene

out of. But my "studies" had gone to the winds weeks ago!

"And who has done me this kindness, for which I must be grateful all my days? Whom must I thank?"

He, generous fellow, had omitted that trifle.

Of course, I told her all.

Miss Keir was very much affected. She held out both her hands to him.

"Thank you. God bless you."

But Hardy had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIII.

THAT night, after the drawing-room was deserted, I sat alone there.

I leaned my cheek against the velvet arm-chair, which still seemed to keep the impress and even the perfume of her black hair. Long meditations seized me. All my past life glided before me in a moving picture—the latter half of it standing still like a diorama under my gaze. Then, it began less to fade than to change—new forms mingling with the old, confusedly at first. Gradually the old shapes melted out, without any sense of loss, and the new, the transcendently beautiful and perfect scene stood out before me, vivid as life itself.

I said in my heart: “Every man, at every great crisis of his existence, has a right, within reasonable and honourable bounds, to secure

his own happiness, to grasp at the cup which he feels would be his soul's strength and salvation. It shall be so. Therefore, to-morrow—to-morrow."

Rising, I paced the room. My weak nervousness was gone—my spirit was strung up to its utmost pitch. I was able to remove mountains. My brain felt clear—my heart throbbed with all the warmth of my youth. Oh! what a youth was mine! In this moment it all came back. I could have written a great book, have lived a great life; have achieved the most daring exploit, have nerved myself to the most heroic sacrifice.

This was what she had made of me—she, and he, James Corrie, whom I honoured with all my soul. But—I *loved* her.

Strange, solemn love—more solemn than in any young man's love—love that comes in autumn season—wild as autumn blasts, delicious and calm as autumn sunshine. Delicious, not merely as itself, but as the remembrance of by-gone spring—clung to as we cling to every soft October day that dies, knowing that afterwards nothing can come, nothing will come, nothing ought to come, but winter

and snows. This fatal love—I say fatal, simply implying that it came of fate, which means of God—was upon me, Alexander Fyfe, now.

I will not deny it, nor murmur at it, nor blush for it: I never sought it, nor rushed in the way of it—it was sent—and therefore was right to come.

Slowly, and rather loath, I went to my chamber. In our parlour I saw Austin Hardy.

He was sitting over the fire. I should have passed him, but he turned round. Such a face—such a wan, haggard, wretched face—that I stopped.

“What have you been doing, so late up? Are you ill?”

“No.”

“Has anything happened? Come, tell me—we were lads together.”

He groaned—“Oh, that I were a lad again! Alick, Alick, if you would help me to begin my life afresh, and make it in any way worthy of ——”

“Of—out with it.”

“Of Ellice Keir.”

I had at times suspected this—had even tried to grasp at the possibility of it. Boldly

too, as we dash at some horrible doubt that we know lies in wait for us—pin it to the ground and worry it—with a sort of hope that it will either vanish into air at our touch, or that we shall succeed in slaying it, leave it dead at our feet, and go on our way, safe and free.

But now, when the beast met me—when—pshaw! let me say it in plain English—when I knew that my cousin loved and wished to marry Ellice Keir, it drove me mad.

All kinds of insanities whirled through my brain. If I had any connected impulse at all, it was to fly at his throat and strangle him.

But only—God be my witness—because he dared to love *her*. Any certainty that she loved him, would—I feel it would—have sanctified him in my eyes; I *could* not have done him any harm.

Of course feelings like these subside, and one smiles at them afterwards, as I smile now. But I would not like to live through that five minutes again.

It passed in total silence. I am thankful to say I never uttered a sound.

Austin at last raised his head, and looked

at me. I steadily met his eyes. There was no mistaking mine.

“My God, Alick!—You too?——”

“Precisely.”

We stood face to face, unblenching, for a full minute or more. Then I said—

“Strike hands. Fair fight—no quarter—
or, if you will, let us both fly, and the devil
take the hindmost.”

For I was very mad indeed. Austin, on the contrary, was very quiet—nay, meek. We seemed to have changed natures.

“No,” he said at length, “Flying is useless; I should drop dead on the road. I’ll take my chance. It must be as you say—a fair fight, and no quarter.”

“It shall be.”

Again a long pause.

“What do you purpose doing?”

“What do *you* purpose?”

Neither answered the other’s question. Each looked in the other’s face, savagely, and dropped his eyes in a sort of pity for the misery imprinted there.

“I wish it had not come to this, Alexander.

We, that should have been brothers, if I had married little Mary."

That child's name calmed us. Both, looking aside, half extended an involuntary hand.

"Let us not be enemies, yet. We do not know whether——"

"Tell me honestly, Austin, have you no belief in her preference—no tangible hope ——?"

"Before heaven, not a straw!"

I breathed freer. I did not refuse his hand; we had been friends so many, many years.

"Fair play, Alick?" said Hardy, almost piteously. "Is it fair play? You are a far cleverer fellow, than I. You can talk with her and interest her. She likes you—respects you. Now, I—oh, what a wretched, trifling, brainless fool I must appear to her!"

Poor fellow!—poor open-hearted, simple-minded soul!

"Lad, lad,"—with my hand on his shoulder as when we used to stand fishing in the silvery Tyne—"Do you think a woman only cares for brains?"

He shook his head hopelessly. "I can't say. I don't know. God forgive me"—with

a bitter, remorseful humiliation—"till now I have hardly known anything of *good* women. That's it," he added, after a pause—"it is not merely losing *her*, you see; if I lose her I shall lose myself—the better self she put into me. My only chance of a new life hangs on her. Think how she would help me—think what a man she would make of me. If I married her——Hold your hands off. Are you mad, Fyfe?"

"I am afraid so."

She married! Married!—sitting by another man's fireside; the wife of another man's bosom—the mother of another man's children! Reason could not take it in; imagination beat it off, even from the merest outworks of the brain. If once allowed to enter the citadel, there would have been a grand explosion—a conflagration reaching to the very heavens, burning down to such a heap of ruins, that no man could rebuild a city thereon any more.

But this is what they call "fine" writing. Better say, in common polite phrase, that the idea of this lady's marriage—and to my cousin——was rather trying to a person of my excitable temperament.

I believe Austin was roused from his own feelings to contemplate mine. I have a vague recollection of his startled, shocked look, and the extreme gentleness of his tone. "Do sit down, there's a good fellow. I knew you didn't mean me any harm."

Also, I mind his watching me as I paced the room—watching with a disturbed, grieved air—and muttering to himself—

"Poor lad—he was always weakly. His mother used to say, a great misfortune would kill him or turn his brain."

"I hope it would."

"Alick—don't say that." He turned upon me absolutely brimming eyes. Now, it so happened that, being her sister's child, Austin's eyes were not unlike my mother's. What could I do, but come and sit down opposite to him, and try desperately to struggle against the strong tendency which I knew my mind had—which almost all minds similarly constituted, and hard worked, have likewise—to lose its balance, and go rocking, rocking, in a pleasant motion that seems temporarily to lull pain, till it plunges over, over—one hair-breadth, and it

is lost in the abyss whence Reason is absent for evermore.

“That is right—sit down. I should be sorry if I wronged you, Alexander; sorry that anything should turn you against me. You, the only fellow who never flattered nor quizzed me—who has stuck by me through thick and thin, for my own sake, I do believe, and not for my property.”

And he was the only fellow who, ignorant of the gimcrackery of literature—disregarding my petty “reputation”—my barren “laurels”—loved heartily, and had loved from boyhood, not the “celebrated author,” but the man Alexander Fyfe.

Such a friendship as ours, cemented by its very incongruities, was rare—and precious as rare. Love could not—should not, annihilate it.

“Austin, let’s to bed. We shall see things clearer in the morning. Good night. God bless you, my boy.”

CHAPTER XIV.

NEVERTHELESS, it was a horrible night, and a horrible waking. Things stand so ghastly plain in the face of day.

Yet, blessings on you, friendly Aquarius, who came so welcomely at dawn, with pail after pail of icy torrents, cooling all the fever in my blood, leaving behind, on soul as well as body, a warm, heroic, healthy glow. I do believe half the passions, crimes, and miseries of humanity would be calmed down under the influence of water-cure.

In the hall, quaffing our matutinal glass, clear as crystal, refreshing as the *elixir vitæ*, my cousin and I met face to face — faces, strange, no doubt, and pallid still, but very different from last night.

No reference to that; temporarily the ghost was laid.

“ Good morning.”

“ Good morning. Starting for your walk?
'Tis damp, rather.”

“ Very. Are you for the wood?”

“ Probably. And you for the moorland?”

“ Ay.”

So tacitly we parted. Generally we walked together, but not now.

Up the hill-side, through the mass of red beech leaves her pony had trampled through; how dead and dank they now lay, slowly passing into corruption. Up, up—it is my habit never to rest till I have climbed as far as one can climb—up, steadily, till I came out on the level moorland.

It was all in a soft mist. Not a breath stirring; not a waft of cold December wind. The year had laid itself down to die patiently. It would not struggle any more. Only sometimes a great drop would come with a plash from some fir tree hard by, like a heavy involuntary tear. But the leaden sky would not yield; the rain refused to fall.

I walked for a whole hour pondering. The text of my meditations was Austin's saying of last night—

“She is my better self. If I lose her I shall lose my soul.”

Now I, weak as my body was, had my soul in my own hand.

I might die—probably I should; but I did not believe that any stroke, however heavy, would drive out of my heart the virtue which her blessed influence had implanted there. Misery might kill me, or (possibly, though I trusted in God’s mercy not!) might make me a lunatic, but it never would make me a criminal. Him, it might.

I took my determination—at least, for a time—till things altered, or till I saw some dim light. Oh no! Unless I sought for it, toiled for it, prayed for it, how could such a fellow as I hope to see the faintest love-light shining on me from her sweet eyes?

So no wrong to her in that determination of mine.

Again Austin and I met in the midst of a cluster of cheerful patients—somehow patients always are cheerful at the water cure. We were cheerful, too. I felt, and something in his voice causing me to look at him hard, showed me he felt, too, an extraordinary calm.

He followed me to our rooms.

"Alexander, just one word. I have thought over last night, and somewhat changed my mind."

"So have I."

"I shall not speak to her—not just yet."

"Nor I."

Again we looked fixedly at one another—again, hand to hand, we rivals, yet, almost brothers, closed.

"Thank you, Austin."

"You are a good fellow, Fyfe."

"I think," said I, brokenly, "this is right—this is how she would wish it to be. We must not hate one another for love of her, who has been a saving angel to us both."

"Ay, so she has."

"Let her be so still—let everything go on as usual, till some chance gives either a sign of her regard. Then, each for himself! a fair struggle, and Heaven comfort the one who falls!"

CHAPTER XV.

DAY after day, during the whole of those strange two weeks, did things "go on as usual." That is, we met her at breakfast, at dinner, at supper; sometimes walked with her, drove with her—passed every evening in her presence, within sound of her voice, within brushing of her dress. Twice every day—fool! how one of us used to court and wait for the minute—we each touched her hand. And many times a day that same one—I will not answer for the other—would, standing by her, in serious fire-side argument, or easy meal-time, look down, right down—she had a curiously steady, earnest, innocent gaze, when she was talking—into the infinitely tender depths, the warm, dark splendours of her eyes.

Yet neither of us, by word or look, sought to win, or by any word or look of hers could

found a hope that we might win, her preference.

And, night after night, when the day's ordeal was over, we used to sit silent over the fire in our own room, sometimes by chance catching sight of one another's faces, and recognising there the marvellous self-denial, the heroic self-control, which kept deferring, each for the other's sake, the delicious, the fatal day.

We sat—not unlike two friends drifting seaward in a crazy boat, incapable of a double freight, who sit sadly gazing—willing to prolong the time, yet knowing that under certain definite circumstances, and within a certain definite time, one or the other *must* go down.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHE was sitting talking with me in Dr James's study ; no one there but our two selves—not a face to watch hers, save mine—and those pictured faces on the walls, which she was so fond of—rare prints gathered by James Corrie on his wanderings :—grand old Buonarotti, the angelic, boyish Raffaele, and Giotto, with that noble, irregular profile, serious, sweet, and brave.

“ It is not unlike Dr James himself, I fancy.”

“ Do you think so ? So do I sometimes.”

And Miss Keir sewed faster at her work, a collar or handkerchief for Harry, who had been at Highwood now for several days.

“ What a pure nature it is,” continued I, and still looked at the Giotto, and thinking of James Corrie. “ So very tender, for all its steadfastness and strength. I hardly ever honoured

any man as I do our friend the Doctor. Do not you?"

"He has been the kindest friend in the world to Harry and to me."

"And to me, also. I must try to tell him so before I go away."

"You are not going away? Surely, not yet?"

That start—that look of earnest regret. What a leap my heart gave!

"I thought—I understood," with a slight hesitation, "that you were to stay at Highwood till after the new year?"

"Did James Corrie say so? And do you wish it?"

And that warm, soft colour which, during all our talk, had been growing, growing, now seemed glowing into scarlet under my gaze. No; I would not take away my eyes. I would see whether they could not light up in hers some tithe of the hidden fire that I knew must be burning in my own.

I was right! She did tremble—she did blush; vividly, almost like a girl of fifteen—this calm, this quiet Ellice Keir.

“ I ought ; indeed I ought to leave. My book—you know—my——”

Stammering, I ceased.

She laid her work down, and looked me straight in the face, in her peculiar way, saying, softly—

“ No ; you must not go. You are not strong enough. Besides, I want you to stay—just a week longer. Never mind your book.”

“ Miss Keir, you know I would thrust it and all the books I ever wrote into that flame this minute, if——”

I remembered my pledge. Ay, Austin—sacredly.

“ If what ? ”

“ If Miss Keir will tell me the reason why she wishes me to stay ? ”

I said this in an exaggeration of carelessness—even trying to make a joke of it. I did not expect to see that strange, unwonted blush rise again over face and throat, nor to see her very fingers tremble as she worked.

What was to become of me ? One second more, and I should have forgotten all—she

would have known all. Thank God it was not so.

I snatched up a book, muttered some vague apology, and rushed out of her sight.

No; this could not go on. An end must be put to it somehow. While she was indifferent, quiet, composed—merely the lady who smilingly shook hands with me morning and night, I could bear it. But to see her, as I saw her this morning—all the woman stirred in her, blushing, trembling—not Miss Keir, but Ellice—Ellice! It could not be. The crisis *must* come.

I made up my mind. But first I went in search of Austin Hardy—hesitatingly and slow; for involuntarily, a wild conviction had forced itself on my mind—(forgive me, thou essence of most simple and pure womanhood; but we men have such delusions sometimes)—a conviction that Austin, at least, would never win Ellice Keir.

I went to meet him in the garden with a strange pity—even a sort of remorse. I found him walking, talking, and laughing with Harry and Ellice Keir.

“ Yes, certainly, we will come, both Harry

and I, and see all these wonderful changes and improvements at Netherlands. I am so happy to think of them all. You will not forget one of them. You promise?"

"I promise."

She spoke earnestly — Hardy too: so earnestly that they did not notice me. They stood still under the great cedar. Harry Keir— what a gleesome face the young fellow had!— was tossing up and catching cedar-cones.

"Yes; I will promise everything. Netherlands shall begin a new life, as its master will, I trust. It shall hardly know its old likeness. It and the people belonging to it shall be the pattern of the whole country. Will that make you happy?"

"Very happy. Few things more so."

"And—" (Ay, dear Austin, I heard and honoured the self-command which smoothed down to indifference that tremulous tone— "when will you do me that honour? It shall be quite a festival when you visit Netherlands. Fyfe—ah, my dear fellow, are you there?— Fyfe shall be asked, and all our good friends at Highwood.")

"Bravo!" cried Harry, with a laugh, as

he tossed up his biggest fircone ; “ And Dr. James, of course.”

“ Most certainly. Every one whom she cares for—every one who honours her. And now, Miss Keir, will you too promise?—When will you come to Netherlands?”

“ I hope—some time—next year?”

Were my eyes dazzled by that red torrent which seemed to roll pouring in upon my brain ; or did I again see, as an hour before, that same warm, tremulous, exquisite blush—such as is always coming and going in a woman’s face when she loves, and is very happy.

Not a word more. She was gone. Austin and I stood under the heavy shade of the cedar. Was it that which made his face, and my heart, seem so dark and cold?

“ Now, Hardy?”

“ Well, I hear you. The time has come?”

“ I think it has.”

I saw him watching her on the terrace where she and Harry were walking merrily. The sun was shining there. As Austin looked, the gloom passed out of his countenance it seemed to gather the sunshine too.

Jealousy ! I had written pages on pages about it—learned “to throw myself into the feeling,” as our literary cant goes—flattered myself I had sketched beautifully, to the very life, the whole thing. But now, to realize what I had described—and fancy indulged in a cruel spasmodic laugh to see how very real I had done it—now to feel the horror gnawing at me, like that fiend the old monk-painter painted, who afterwards came and stood at his elbow till he died ; to feel not only through my brains, but in my heart, that jealousy of which we poets prate so grandly—make into such pathetic novels, such withering tragedies—jealousy, which we say leads to hatred, madness, murder ! I could believe it—I could prove it. I plumbed its lowest depths of possible crime in that one minute when I watched my cousin Austin watching Ellice Keir.

I had loved Austin—did so still. Yet for that one minute—happily it was only one—I hated him, loathed him. I believe I could have seen him shot down, and mounted over his dead body to the citadel of my

frenzied hope—as our poor fellows are perhaps doing this day as I write, in the trenches before Sebastopol. But, “better is he that ruleth his spirit than he who taketh a city.” I ruled mine.

“Austin, this must end.”

“It must. When?”

“To-day, if you will. There—look, she has gone within doors.”

We stood—the crisis was at hand. Our life-boat reeled—quivered. Very pale sat we. *Which* would be the one to go down?

“Who is to learn his fortune first?” said Hardy.

“Let’s draw lots.” I laughed—I felt spurred on to any kind of insane folly. “Let’s toss up, as the children do; or, since the coin of the realm is as dross to you, and as life’s worth to me—let’s take to the sentimental, the poetical. Here, choose.”

I tore off a sprig of cedar, and a sprig of a yew-tree hard by, and held out to him the two stems, the leaves being hidden.

“Now, which? who is for his cedar-palace, and who for his branch of yew?”

I know Hardy thought I was losing my wits fast. He looked at me with pity. "No," he said, gently; "no child's play—we must be men. Go you in and speak to 'her first."

He leaped the hedge into the field. So it became my doom. Best, far the best.

The door happened to be fastened. I thought I would get into the house, as I often did, by the low windows of the Doctor's study. Standing there, I looked in.

James Corrie sat at his table, not writing, but thinking. His chin was on his folded hands—his eyes out-looking, calm and clear. What a noble face it was — the face of one who has gone through seas of trouble, and landed at length in serene, soul-satisfying joy.

Twice I knocked on the pane, and he did not perceive me. Then hearing me call, he came forward, smiling.

I said, I would not interrupt him, as I was going to Miss Keir.

"Just stay one minute. I wanted to say a word to you—in fact, by the particular wish of Miss Keir."

I sat down.

James Corrie folded his newspaper, closed his desk, looked—something different from what James Corrie was wont to look, but happy ineffably happy.

“I am waiting to hear——”

“Ay, and you shall hear, my old friend, for I know you will rejoice. Simply this. Miss Keir has told me you intend leaving us, and she wishes, most earnestly, that you would stay till after the New Year.”

“And you?”

“Even if Alexander Fyfe were not welcome for his own sake, as he knows he is, still whatever adds to her happiness must necessarily add to mine.”

He whom I knew she held—as in his simple goodness all good women might hold him—like a very brother; he who, she said, had been to her “the kindest friend in the world”—strange for him to speak to me thus! Perhaps, in spite of myself, I had betrayed my feelings. Did he think—did he guess——

“I see, Fyfe, you do not quite understand me. You do not know—in truth, being

neither of us young, we were rather unwilling it should be known or talked about—that Miss Keir and myself have been engaged for two years. That, God willing, next Saturday, New Year's morning, will be our wedding-day.”

CHAPTER XVII.

No—I was right; it did not slay me. This misery passed by, and destroyed neither my life nor Austin's soul.

Infinite mercy strengthened me; I was able to help and strengthen him. It was very fortunate that only I was present when the truth came out.

That truth, neither James Corrie nor his wife have ever guessed, or will ever learn. Why should they? It would only pain them in their happiness. And what blame to them? It was all our own delusion. He is still the worthiest man, and she the noblest woman, we ever knew. God bless them!

Hardy has gone home to his estates, where he intends always to reside. If he is able to carry out one-half of his purposes, no wealthy landowner in England will be more

useful, more honoured in his generation than Austin Hardy, Esquire, of Netherlands; and widely different as our fortunes are, he and I shall be as brothers until death.

For myself, I am now in my old London haunts, finishing my long-unfinished book. It will be a different book from what it was to be; different, oh how different! from what it might have been. But it will be a very tolerable book still—wholesome, cheerful, brave. Such an one as is the “*Io triumphe*” of a great spiritual Marathon—such an one as I never could have written in all my days, had I not, in body and soul, undergone the Water Cure.

THE
LAST HOUSE IN C— STREET.

THE
LAST HOUSE IN C— STREET.

I AM not a believer in ghosts in general ; I see no good in them. They come—that is, are reported to come—so irrelevantly, purposelessly—so ridiculously, in short—that one's common sense as regards this world, one's supernatural sense of the other, are alike revolted. Then nine out of ten ' capital ghost stories ' are so easily accounted for ; and in the tenth, when all natural explanation fails, one who has discovered the extraordinary difficulty there is in all society in getting hold of that very slippery article called a *fact*, is strongly inclined to shake a dubious head, ejaculating, " Evidence ! it is all a question of evidence ! "

But my unbelief springs from no dogged or contemptuous scepticism as to the possibility—however great the improbability—of that strange

impression upon, or communication to, spirit in matter, from spirit wholly immaterialized, which is vulgarly called “a ghost.” There is no credulity more blind, no ignorance more childish, than that of the sage who tries to measure “heaven and earth and the things under the earth,” with the small two-foot rule of his own brains. Dare we presume to argue concerning any mystery of the universe, “It is inexplicable, and therefore impossible?”

Premising these opinions, though simply as opinions, I am about to relate what I must confess seems to me a thorough ghost-story; its external and circumstantial evidence being indisputable, while its psychological causes and results, though not easy of explanation, are still more difficult to be explained away. The ghost, like Hamlet’s, was “an honest ghost.” From her daughter—an old lady, who, bless her good and gentle memory! has since learned the secrets of all things—I heard this veritable tale.

“My dear,” said Mrs MacArthur to me—it was in the early days of table-moving, when young folk ridiculed and elder folk were shocked at the notion of calling up one’s

departed ancestors into one's dinner-table, and learning the wonders of the angelic world by the bobbings of a hat or the twirlings of a plate ;—"My dear," continued the old lady, "I do not like trifling with spirits."

"Why not? Do you believe in them?"

"A little."

"Did you ever see one?"

"Never. But once, I heard one."

She looked serious, as if she hardly liked to speak about it, either from a sense of awe or from fear of ridicule. But it was impossible to laugh at any illusions of the gentle old lady, who never uttered a harsh or satirical word to a living soul. Likewise the evident awe with which she mentioned the circumstance was rather remarkable in one who had a large stock of common sense, little wonder, and no ideality.

I was very curious to hear Mrs MacArthur's ghost-story.

"My dear, it was a long time ago, so long that you may fancy I forget and confuse the circumstances. But I do not. Sometimes I think one recollects more clearly things that happened in one's teens—I was eighteen that

year—than a great many nearer events. And besides, I had other reasons for remembering vividly everything belonging to this time,—for I was in love, you must know.”

She looked at me with a mild, deprecating smile, as if hoping my youthfulness would not consider the thing so very impossible or ridiculous. No; I was all interest at once.

“In love with Mr MacArthur,” I said, scarcely as a question, being at that Arcadian time of life when one takes as a natural necessity, and believes in as an undoubted truth, that all people, that is, good people, marry their first love.

“No, my dear; not with Mr MacArthur.”

I was so astonished, so completely dumbfounded—for I had woven a sort of ideal round my good old friend—that I suffered Mrs Mac Arthur to knit in silence for full five minutes. My surprise was not lessened when she said, with a gratified little smile—

“He was a young gentleman of good parts; and he was very fond of me. Proud, too, rather. For though you might not think it, my dear, I was actually a beauty in those days.”

I had very little doubt of it. The slight lithe figure, the tiny hands and feet,—if you had walked behind Mrs MacArthur down the street you might have taken her for a young woman still. Certainly, people lived slower and easier in the last generation than in ours.

“Yes, I was the beauty of Bath. Mr Everest fell in love with me there. I was much gratified; for I had just been reading Miss Burney’s *Cecilia*, and I thought him exactly like Mortimer Delvil. A very pretty story, *Cecilia*; did you ever read it?”

“No.” And, to arrive quicker at her tale, I leaped to the only conclusion which could reconcile the two facts of my good old friends having had a lover named Everest, and being now Mrs MacArthur. “Was it *his* ghost you saw?”

“No, my dear, no; thank goodness, he is alive still. He calls here sometimes; he has been a faithful friend to our family. Ah!” with a slow shake of the head, half pleased, half pensive, ‘you would hardly believe, my dear, what a very pretty fellow he was.’”

One could scarcely smile at the odd phrase,

pertaining to last-century novels and to the loves of our great-grandmothers. I listened patiently to the wandering reminiscences which still further delayed the ghost-story.

“But, Mrs MacArthur, was it in Bath that you saw or heard what I think you were going to tell me? The ghost, you know?”

“Don’t call it *that*; it sounds as if you were laughing at it. And you must not, for it is really true; as true as that I sit here, an old lady of seventy-five; and that then I was a young gentlewoman of eighteen. Nay, my dear, I will tell you all about it.”

“We had been staying in London, my father and mother, Mr Everest, and I. He had persuaded them to take me; he wanted to show me a little of the world, though even his world was but a narrow one, my dear,—for he was a law student, living poorly and working hard.

“He took lodgings for us near the Temple; in C—— street, the last house there, looking on to the river. He was very fond of the river; and often of evenings, when his work was too heavy to let him take us to Ranelagh or to the play, he used to walk with my father

and mother and me, up and down the Temple Gardens. Were you ever in the Temple Gardens? It is a pretty place now—a quiet, grey nook in the midst of noise and bustle; the stars look wonderful through those great trees; but still it is not like what it was then, when I was a girl.”

Ah! no; impossible.

“It was in the Temple Gardens, my dear that I remember we took our last walk—my mother, Mr Everest, and I—before she went home to Bath. She was very anxious and restless to go, being too delicate for London gaieties. Besides, she had a large family at home, of which I was the eldest; and we were anxiously expecting the youngest in a month or two. Nevertheless, my dear mother had gone about with me, taken me to all the shows and sights that I, a hearty and happy girl, longed to see, and entered into them with almost as great enjoyment as my own.

“But to-night she was pale, rather grave, and steadfastly bent on returning home.

“We did all we could to persuade her to the contrary, for on the next night but one was to have been the crowning treat of all our London

pleasures: we were to see *Hamlet* at Drury-lane, with John Kemble and Sarah Siddons! Think of that, my dear. Ah! you have no such sights now. Even my grave father longed to go, and urged in his mild way that we should put off our departure. But my mother was determined.

“At last Mr Everest said—I could show you the very spot where he stood, with the river—it was high water—lapping against the wall, and the evening sun shining on the Southwark houses opposite. He said—it was very wrong, of course, my dear; but then he was in love, and might be excused,—

“‘Madam,’ said he, ‘it is the first time I ever knew you think of yourself alone.’

“‘Myself, Edmond?’

“‘Pardon me, but would it not be possible for you to return home, leaving behind, for two days only, Dr Thwaite and Mistress Dorothy?’

“‘Leave them behind—leave them behind!’ She mused over the words. ‘What say you, Dorothy?’

“I was silent. In very truth, I had never been parted from her in all my life. It had

never crossed my mind to wish to part from her, or to enjoy any pleasure without her, till—till within the last three months. ‘Mother, don’t suppose I——’

“But here I caught sight of Mr Everest and stopped.

‘“Pray continue, Mistress Dorothy.”’

“No, I could not. He looked so vexed, so hurt; and we had been so happy together. Also, we might not meet again for years, for the journey between London and Bath was then a serious one, even to lovers; and he worked very hard—had few pleasures in his life. It did indeed seem almost selfish of my mother.

“Though my lips said nothing, perhaps my sad eyes said only too much, and my mother felt it.

“She walked with us a few yards, slowly and thoughtfully. I could see her now, with her pale, tired face, under the cherry-coloured ribbons of her hood. She had been very handsome as a young woman, and was most sweet-looking still—my dear, good mother!

‘Dorothy, we will discuss this no more. I am very sorry, but I must go home.

However, I will persuade your father to remain with you till the week's end. Are you satisfied !'

" 'No,' was the first filial impulse of my heart; but Edmond pressed my arm with such an entreating look, that almost against my will I answered "Yes."

"Mr Everest overwhelmed my mother with his delight and gratitude. She walked up and down for some time longer, leaning on his arm—she was very fond of him; then stood looking on the river, upwards and downwards.

'I suppose this is my last walk in London. Thank you for all the care you have taken of me. And when I am gone home,—mind, oh, mind, Edmond, that you take special care of Dorothy.'

"These words, and the tone in which they were spoken, fixed themselves on my mind—first, from gratitude, not unmingled with regret, as if I had not been so considerate to her as she to me; *afterwards*—But we often err, my dear, in dwelling too much on that word. We finite creatures have only to deal with 'now'—nothing whatever to do

with ‘afterwards.’ In this case, I have ceased to blame myself or others. Whatever was, being past, was right to be, and could not have been otherwise.

“My mother went home next morning, alone. We were to follow in a few days, though she would not allow us to fix any time. Her departure was so hurried that I remember nothing about it, save her answer to my father’s urgent desire—almost command—that if anything were amiss she would immediately let him know.

“‘Under all circumstances, wife,’ he reiterated, ‘this you promise?’

“‘I promise.’

“Though when she was gone he declared she need not have said it so earnestly, since we should be at home almost as soon as the slow Bath coach could take her there and bring us back a letter. And besides, there was nothing likely to happen. But he fidgetted a good deal, being unused to her absence in their happy wedded life. He was, like most men, glad to blame anybody but himself, and the whole day, and the next, was

cross at intervals with both Edmond and me; but we bore it—and patiently.

“ ‘ It will be all right when we get him to the theatre. He has no real cause for anxiety about her. What a dear woman she is, and a precious—your mother, Dorothy ! ’

“ I rejoiced to hear my lover speak thus, and thought there hardly ever was young gentlewoman so blessed as I.

“ We went to the play. Ah, you know nothing of what a play is, now-a-days. You never saw John Kemble and Mrs Siddons. Though in dresses and shows it was far inferior to the *Hamlet* you took me to see last week, my dear—and though I perfectly well remember being on the point of laughing when in the most solemn scene, it became clearly evident that the Ghost had been drinking. Strangely enough, no after events connected therewith ever were able to drive from my mind the vivid impression of this my first play. Strange, also, that the play should have been *Hamlet*. Do you think that Shakspeare believed in—in what people call ‘ ghosts ? ’ ”

I could not say; but I thought Mrs Mac Arthur's ghost very long in coming.

"Don't, my dear—don't; do anything but laugh at it."

She was visibly affected, and it was not without an effort that she proceeded in her story.

"I wish you to understand exactly my position that night—a young girl, her head full of the enchantment of the stage—her heart of something not less engrossing. Mr Everest had supped with us, leaving us both in the best of spirits; indeed my father had gone to bed, laughing heartily at the remembrance of the antics of Mr Grimaldi, which had almost obliterated the Queen and Hamlet from his memory, on which the ridiculous always took a far stronger hold than the awful or sublime.

"I was sitting—let me see—at the window, chatting with my maid Patty, who was brushing the powder out of my hair. The window was open half-way, and looking out on the Thames; and the summer night being very warm and starry, made it almost like sitting out of doors. There was none of the awe given by the solitude of a closed room, when every sound is magnified,

and every shadow seems alive.

“As I said, we had been chatting and laughing; for Patty and I were both very young, and she had a sweetheart, too. She, like every one of our household, was a warm admirer of Mr Everest. I had just been half scolding, half smiling at her praises of him, when St Paul’s great clock came booming over the silent river.

“‘Eleven,’ counted Patty. ‘Terrible late we be, Mistress Dorothy: not like Bath hours, I reckon.’

“‘Mother will have been in bed an hour ago,’ said I, with a little self-reproach at not having thought of her till now.

“The next minute my maid and I both started up with a simultaneous exclamation.

“‘Did you hear that?’

“‘Yes, a bat flying against the window.’

“‘But the lattices are open, Mistress Dorothy.’

“‘So they were; and there was no bird or bat or living thing about—only the quiet summer night, the river, and the stars.

“‘I be certain sure I heard it. And I think it was like—just a bit like—somebody tapping.’

“ ‘ Nonsense, Patty !’ But it *had* struck me thus—though I said it was a bat. It was exactly like the sound of fingers against a pane—very soft, gentle fingers, such as, in passing into her flower-garden, my mother used often to tap outside the school-room casement at home.

“ ‘ I wonder, did father hear anything. It—the bird, you know, Patty—might have flown at his window, too ?’

“ ‘ Oh, Mistress Dorothy !’ Patty would not be deceived. I gave her the brush to finish my hair, but her hand shook too much. I shut the window, and we both sat down facing it.

“ At that minute, distinct, clear, and unmistakeable, like a person giving a summons in passing by, we heard once more the tapping on the pane. But nothing was seen ; not a single shadow came between us and the open air, the bright starlight.

“ Startled I was, and awed, but I was not frightened. The sound gave me even an inexplicable delight. But I had hardly time to recognise my feelings, still less to analyse them, when a loud cry came from my father’s room.

“ ‘ Dolly,—Dolly ! ’ ”

“ Now my mother and I had both one name, but he always gave her the old-fashioned pet name,—I was invariably Dorothy. Still I did not pause to think, but ran to his locked door and answered.

“ It was a long time before he took any notice, though I heard him talking to himself, and moaning. He was subject to bad dreams, especially before his attacks of gout. So my first alarm lightened. I stood listening, knocking at intervals, until at last he replied.

“ ‘ What do’ee want, child ? ’

“ ‘ Is anything the matter, father ? ’

“ ‘ Nothing. Go to thy bed, Dorothy.’

“ ‘ Did you not call ? Do you want any one ? ’

“ ‘ Not thee. O Dolly, my poor Dolly,’—and he seemed to be almost sobbing, ‘ Why did I let thee leave me ? ’

“ ‘ Father, you are not going to be ill ? It is not the gout, is it ? ’ (for that was the time when he wanted my mother most, and, indeed, when he was wholly unmanageable by any one but her.)

“ ‘ Go away. Get to thy bed, girl; I don’t want ’ee.’ ”

“ I thought he was angry with me for having been in some sort the cause of our delay, and retired very miserable. Patty and I sat up a good while longer, discussing the dreary prospect of my father’s having a fit of the gout here in London lodgings, with only us to nurse him, and my mother away. Our alarm was so great that we quite forgot the curious circumstance which had first attracted us, till Patty spoke up, from her bed on the floor.

“ ‘ I hope master beant going to be very ill, and that noise—you know—came for a warning. Do ’ee think it *was* a bird, Mistress Dorothy ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Very likely. Now, Patty, let us go to sleep.’ ”

“ But I did not, for all night I heard my father groaning at intervals. I was certain it was the gout, and wished from the bottom of my heart that we had gone home with mother.

“ What was my surprise when, quite early, I heard him rise and go down, just as if nothing was ailing him ! I found him sitting

at the breakfast-table in his travelling coat, looking very haggard and miserable, but evidently bent on a journey.

‘ Father, you are not going to Bath ? ’

‘ Yes, I be.’

‘ Not till the evening coach starts,’ I cried, alarmed. ‘ We can’t, you know ? ’

‘ I’ll take a post-chaise, then. We must be off in an hour.’

“ An hour ! The cruel pain of parting—(my dear, I believe I used to feel things keenly when I was young)—shot through me—through and through. A single hour, and I should have said good-bye to Edmond—one of those heart-breaking farewells when we seem to leave half of our poor young life behind us, forgetting that the only real parting is when there is no love left to part from. A few years, and I wondered how I could have crept away and wept in such intolerable agony at the mere bidding good-bye to Edmond—Edmond, who loved me !

“ Every minute seemed a day till he came in, as usual, to breakfast. My red eyes and my father’s corded trunk explained all.

‘ Dr Thwaite, you are not going ? ’

‘ Yes, I am,’ repeated my father. He sat moodily leaning on the table—would not taste his breakfast.

‘ Not till the night coach, surely ? I was to take you and Mistress Dorothy to see Mr Benjamin West, the king’s painter.’

‘ Let king and painters alone, lad ; I am going home to my Dolly.’

“ Mr Everest used many arguments, gay and grave, upon which I hung with earnest conviction and hope. He made things so clear always ; he was a man of much brighter parts than my father, and had great influence over him.

“ ‘ Dorothy,’ he whispered, ‘ help me to persuade the Doctor. It is so little time I beg for, only a few hours ; and before so long a parting.’— Ay, longer than he thought, or I.

‘ Children,’ cried my father at last, ‘ you are a couple of fools. Wait till you have been married twenty years. I must go to my Dolly. I know there is something amiss at home.’

“ I should have felt alarmed, but I saw Mr Everest smile ; and besides, I was yet

growing under his fond look, as my father spoke of our being ‘married twenty years.’

‘Father, you have surely no reason for thinking this? If you have, tell us.’

“My father just lifted his head, and looked me wofully in the face.

‘Dorothy, last night, as sure as I see you now, I saw your mother.’

‘Is that all?’ cried Mr Everest, laughing; ‘why, my good sir, very likely you did; you were dreaming about her.’

‘I had not gone to sleep.’

‘How did you see her?’

‘Coming into my room, just as she used to do in our bedroom at home, with the candle in her hand and the baby asleep on her arm.’

‘Did she speak?’ asked Mr Everest, with another and rather satirical smile; ‘remember, you saw *Hamlet* last night. Indeed, sir—indeed, Dorothy—it was a mere dream. I do not believe in ghosts; it would be an insult to common sense, to human wisdom—nay, even to Divinity itself.’

“Edmond spoke so earnestly, justly, and withal so affectionately, that perforce I agreed;

and even my father became to feel rather ashamed of his own weakness. He, a sensible man and the head of a family, to yield to a mere superstitious fancy, springing probably from a hot supper and an over-excited brain! To the same cause Mr Everest attributed the other incident, which somewhat hesitatingly I told him.

‘Dear, it was a bird; nothing but a bird. One flew in at my window last spring; it had hurt itself, and I kept it, and nursed it, and petted it. It was such a pretty, gentle little thing, it put me in mind of Dorothy.’

‘Did it?’ said I.

‘And at last it got well and flew away.’

‘Ah! that was not like Dorothy.’

“Thus, my father being persuaded, it was not hard to persuade me. We settled to remain till evening. Edmond and I, with my maid Patty, went about together, chiefly in Mr West’s Gallery, and in the quiet shade of our favourite Temple Gardens. And if for those four stolen hours, and the sweetness in them, I afterwards suffered untold remorse and bitterness, I have entirely for-

given myself, as I know my dear mother would have forgiven me, long ago.”

Mrs MacArthur stopped, wiped her eyes, and then continued—speaking more in the matter-of-fact way that old people speak in, than she had been lately doing.

“Well, my dear, where was I?”

“In the Temple Gardens.”

“Yes, yes. Then we came home to dinner. My father always enjoyed his dinner, and his nap afterwards; he had nearly recovered himself now: only looked tired from loss of rest. Edmond and I sat in the window, watching the barges and wherries down the Thames; there were no steamboats then, you know.

“Some one knocked at the door with a message for my father, but he slept so heavily he did not hear. Mr Everest went to see what it was; I stood at the window. I remember mechanically watching the red sail of a Margate hoy that was going down the river, and thinking with a sharp pang how dark the room seemed to grow, in a moment, with Edmond not there.

“Re-entering, after a somewhat long absence,

he never looked at me, but went straight to my father.

‘Sir, it is almost time for you to start (oh! Edmond). ‘There is a coach at the door; and, pardon me, but I think you should travel quickly.’

“My father sprang to his feet.

‘Dear sir, wait one moment; I have received news from Bath. You have another little daughter, sir, and——’

‘Dolly, my Dolly!’ Without another word my father rushed away, leaped into the post-chaise that was waiting, and drove off.

‘Edmond!’ I gasped.

‘My poor little girl—my own Dorothy!’

“By the tenderness of his embrace, less lover-like, then brother-like—by his tears, for I could feel them on my neck—I knew, as well as if he had told me, that I should never see my dear mother any more.—

“She had died in childbirth,” continued the old lady after a long pause—“died at night, at the same hour and minute that I had heard the tapping on the window-pane, and my father had thought he saw her coming into his room with a baby on her arm.”

“Was the baby dead, too?”

“They thought so then, but it afterwards revived.”

“What a strange story!”

“I do not ask you to believe in it. How and why and what it was I cannot tell; I only know that it assuredly was as I have told it.

“And Mr Everest?” I inquired, after some hesitation.

The old lady shook her head. “Ah, my dear, you may perhaps learn—though I hope you will not—how very, very seldom things turn out as one expects when one is young. After that day I did not see Mr Everest for twenty years.”

“How wrong of him—how——”

“Don’t blame him; it was not his fault. You see, after that time my father took a prejudice against him—not unnatural, perhaps; and *she* was not there to make things straight. Besides, my own conscience was very sore, and there were the six children at home, and the little baby had no mother: so at last I made up my mind. I should have loved him just the same if we had waited twenty years.

I told him so: but he could not see things in that light. Don't blame him—my dear—don't blame him. It was as well, perhaps, as it happened."

"Did he marry?"

"Yes, after a few years; and loved his wife dearly. When I was about one-and-thirty, I married Mr MacArthur. So neither of us was unhappy, you see—at least, not more so than most people; and we became sincere friends afterwards. Mr and Mrs Everest come to see me still, almost every Sunday. Why, you foolish child, you are not crying?"

Ay, I was—but scarcely at the ghost-story.

A FAMILY IN LOVE.

A FAMILY IN LOVE.

THIS is the age of complainings. Nobody suffers in silence; nobody breaks his or her heart in secrecy and solitude: they all take "the public" into their confidence—the convenient public, which, like murder,

Hath no tongue, but speaks
With most miraculous organ.

Of course it is neither the confider's fault nor yet the confidant's, if the winds sometimes whisper that King Midas has asses' ears.

Mine is no such confession. I have no gossip to retail of my neighbours: I am a very quiet gentleman, who prefer confining my interests and observations to my own household, my own immediate family. Ay, there lies my inevitable grief, there lurks my

secret wrong ; I am the unhappy elder brother of a family in love.

The fact dimly dawned upon me, widening by degrees, ever since I came home from India last year, and took upon myself the charge of my five sisters, aged from about—— But Martha might object to my particularising. Good little Patty ! what a merry creature she was when she went nutting and fishing with me. And what ugly caps she has taken to wearing, poor dear ! And why can't she speak as gently when scolding the servants, as I remember our sweet-voiced, pretty mother used always to do ? And why, in spite of their mutual position, will she persist in calling Mr Green, with a kind of frigid olemnity, “ Mr Green ? ” But he does not seem to mind it : probably he never was called anything else.

He is a very worthy person, nevertheless, and I have a great respect for him. When my sister Martha—Miss Heathcote, as she has been called from her cradle—by letter announced to me at Madras that she intended to relinquish that title for the far less euphonious one of Mrs Green, I was, to

say the least of it, surprised. I had thought, for various reasons (of no moment now), that my eldest sister was not likely to marry—I rather hoped she would not. We might have been so comfortable, poor Patty and I. However, I had no business to interfere with either her happiness or her destiny; so when, the first Sunday after my arrival at home, a cozy carriage drove up the avenue, and a bald, rather stout little man got out, to be solemnly introduced to me as “Mr Green” I submitted to the force of circumstances, and to the duties of a brother-in-law.

He has dined with us every Sunday since. He and I are capital friends; regularly, when the ladies retire, he informs me what the Funds have been at, day by day during the past week, and which is the safest railway to buy shares in for the week following. A most worthy person, I repeat; will make a kind husband, and I suppose Martha likes him; but——. However, poor girl, she is old enough to judge for herself, and it is no business of mine. Some time, before long, I shall give her away at the old parish church—quietly, without any show; I shall see her walk down the church-aisle with old Mr Green—he in his

best white waistcoat, and she in her sober gray poplin, which she insists on being married in—not the clear soft muslin and long lace veil I quite well remember seeing Patty working at and blushing over, we won't say how many years ago. Well, women are better married, they say; but I think I would rather have had Martha an old maid.

My second sister, Angeline, was fifteen when I left England; and the very loveliest creature I ever beheld. Everybody knew it, everybody acknowledged it. She could not walk down the street without people turning to look after her; she could not enter a room without creating a general whisper: "Who is she?"—The same thing continued as she grew up to womanhood. All the world was at her feet; everyone said she would make a splendid marriage—become a countess at least; and I do believe Angeline herself had the fullest confidence in that probability. She refused lovers by the dozen; every letter I got told me of some new slaughter of Miss Angeline's. I would have pitied the poor fellows, only she was such a dazzling beauty, and no man falls out of love so safely as a man who falls in love with a beauty. I never heard

that anybody died either by consumption, cord, or pistol, through the cruelty of my sister Angeline.

But, like most cruel damsels, she paid the penalty of her hard-heartedness; when I came home I found Angeline Heathcote, Angeline Heathcote still. Beautiful yet, beautiful exceedingly; a walking picture, a visible poem: it was a real pleasure to me to have such a handsome creature about the house. Though people did say, with a mysterious shake of the head, that, handsome as she was, if I had only seen my sister two or three years ago! And Angeline herself became tenacious on the subject of new gowns, and did not like it to be generally known whether she or Charlotte was the elder. Good, plain, merry Charlotte, who never thought about either her looks or her age!

Yet Charlotte was the first who brought me into trouble—that trouble which I am now called upon to bemoan. I had not been at home three months, when there came a young gentleman—a very lively and pleasant young gentleman, too—who sang duets with the younger girls, and made himself quite at home in my

family circle. I myself did not much meddle with him, thought him a good-natured lad, and no more—until one fine morning he astonished me by requesting five minutes' conversation with me in my study. (Alas! such misfortunes come not singly—my study has never been safe from similar applications and conversations since.)

I was very kind to the young man; when he blushed, I looked another way; when he trembled, I invited him to take a chair. I listened to his stammering explanations with the utmost patience and sympathy; I even tried to help him out with them—till he came to the last clause.

Now, I do say that a man who asks you for your purse, your horse, your friendship, after only four weeks' acquaintance, has considerable courage; but a man who, after that brief period since his introduction, comes and asks you for your *sister*—why, one's first impulse is to kick him down stairs.

Happily, I controlled myself. I called to mind that Mr Cuthbert was a very honest young fellow, and that if he did choose to risk his whole future upon the result of a

month's laughing, and singing, and dancing at balls—certainly it was his affair, not mine. My business solely related to Charlotte. I was just despatching it in the quickest and friendliest manner, by advising the young fellow to go back to college and not make a fool of himself in vain, when he informed me that my consent only was required, since he and Charlotte had been a plighted couple for the space of three whole days !

I have always held certain crotchets on the paramount rights of lovers, and the wrong of interfering with any apparently sincere vows ; so I sent for Lotty—talked with her ; found she was just as foolish as he. That because he was the best waltzer, the sweetest tenor singer, and had the handsomest moustache she knew—our lively Charlotte was quite contented to dance through life with Mr Cuthbert, and decidedly proud of having his diamond ring on her third finger, and being considered “engaged”—as indeed they were likely to remain, if their minds changed not, for the next ten years.

So, what could I do?—Nothing but deal with the young simpletons—if such they were

—according to their folly. If true, their love would have time to prove itself such; if false, they would best find out that fact by its not being thwarted. I kissed away Lotty's tears, silly child! and next Sunday I had the honour of carving for brother-in-law elect No. 2.

It never rains but it pours. Whether Angeline was roused at once to indignation and condescension by Charlotte's engagement—which she was the loudest in inveighing against—or whether, as was afterwards reported to me, she was influenced by a certain statistical newspaper paragraph, maliciously read aloud by Mr Cuthbert for general edification, that women's chances of matrimony were proved by the late census to diminish greatly between the ages of thirty and thirty-five; but most assuredly Angeline's demeanour changed. She stooped to be agreeable as well as beautiful. To more than one suitor whom she had of old swept haughtily by, did she now graciously incline; and the result was—partly owing to the gaieties of this autumn's election—that Miss Angeline Heathcote, the beauty of the county, held a general election on her own private account.

Alas for me! In one week I had no less than four hopeful candidates requesting "the honour of an interview" in my study.

Angeline's decision was rather dilatory—they were all such excellent matches; and, poor girl—with her beauty for her chief gift, and with all the tinsel adoration it brought her—she had never been used to think of marriage as anything more than a mere worldly arrangement. She was ready to choose a husband as she would a wedding-gown—dispassionately, carefully, as the best out of a large selection of articles, each rich and good in its way, and warranted to wear. . She had plenty of common sense, and an acute judgment; as for her heart——

"You see, Nigel," she said to me, when weighing the respective claims and merits of Mr Archer and Sir Rowland Griffith Jones—"you see, I never was sentimentally inclined. I want to be married. I think I should be better married than single. Of course, my husband must be a good man; also, he should be a wealthy man; because—well!—because I rather like show and splendour: they suit me."

And she glanced into the mirror at something which, certainly, if any woman has any excuse for the vanities of life, might have pleaded Angeline's.

"But," I argued—half sorrowfully, as when you see an ignorant child throwing gold away, and choosing sham jewels for their pitiful glistening, "you surely would think it necessary to love your husband?"

"O yes; and I like Sir Rowland extremely—perhaps even better than Mr Archer—though *he* has been fond of me so long, poor fellow! But he will get over it—all men do."

So, though the balance hung for a whole week doubtful—Heaven forgive the girl! but true love was not in her nature, and how can people see further than their lights go?—I was soon pretty certain that fate would decide the marriage-question in favour of the baronet. As Lotty said, Angeline would look magnificent in the family diamonds as Lady Griffith Jones.

The Welsh cause triumphed; Mr Archer quitted the field. He had been an old ac-

quaintance; but—what was that to Sir Rowland and 10,000*l.* a-year?

After Angeline's affair was settled, there came a lull in the family epidemic—possibly because the head of the family grew savage as a bear, and for a full month his spirit hugged itself into fierce misanthropy, or rather misogyny, contemning the whole female sex, especially such as contemplated, or were contemplated in, the *unholy* estate of matrimony.

No wonder! I could not find peace in my own house; I had not my own sisters' society; not a single family fireside evening could I get from week's end to week's end; not a room could I enter without breaking in on some *tête-à-tête*; not a corner could I creep into without stumbling upon a pair of lovers. For a little while these fond couples kept on their good behaviour towards me—preserved a degree of reserve towards each other out of respect to the head of the house, the elder brother; but gradually it deteriorated—ceased. Nay, I, who belong to the old generation—which was foolish enough to deem

caresses hallowed things, that the mere pressure of a beloved woman's hand, not to speak of her sacred mouth, was a thing not to be made a public show of—never to be thought of without a tender reverence, a delicious fear—I, Nigel Heathcote, have actually seen two young men, strangers a little year ago, kiss my two sisters openly before their whole family—before their brother's very face !

My situation became intolerable. I fled the fireside ; I took refuge in my study. Wo betide the next lover who should assail me there !

Surely that fatality would not again arrive for same time. When the elder ones were once married and away, surely I, and Constantia, and little Lizzie, might live a few years in fraternal peace, unmolested by the haunting shadow of impending matrimony.

It occurred to me that in the interval of the weddings I would send for an old friend, a bachelor like myself—an honest manly fellow, who worked hard from circuit to circuit, and got barely one brief a-year. Yes, Will Launceston would keep me company ; and

we would spend our days in the woods, and our evenings in my study, safe out of the way of lovers, weddings, and womankind.

I had just written to him, when my sister Martha came in with a very serious face, and told me "she wished for a little conversation with me."

Ominous beginning! But she was not a young man, and could not well attack me concerning any more of my sisters. At least so I congratulated myself — alas, too soon!

My sister settled herself by the fire with a serious countenance.

"My dear Nigel."

"My dear Martha."

"I wish to consult you on a matter which has recently come to my knowledge, and has given me much pain, and some anxiety."

"Indeed!" and I am afraid my tone was less sympathising than eager, since from her troubled nervous manner, I thought—I hoped, the matter in question indicated the secession of Mr Green. "Go on. Is it about"—I

stopped and corrected myself hypocritically—
“about the girls?”

She assented.

“Whew!”—a disappointed whistle, faint and low. “Still, go on. I’ll listen to anything except another proposal.”

Martha shook her head. “Alas, I fear it will never come to that! Brother, have you noticed?—but men never do—still, I myself have observed a great change in Constantia lately.”

Now, Constantia always was different from the other girls—liked solitude and books, talked little, and had a trick of reverie. In short, was what young people called “interesting,” and old people “romantic”—the sort of creature who, did she grow up a remarkable woman, would have her youthful peculiarities carefully and respectfully noted, with “I always said there was a great deal in that girl;” but who, did she turn out nothing particular, would be laughed at, and probably would laugh at herself, for having been “very sentimental when she was young.” Nevertheless, having at one time of my life shared

that imputation, I was tender over the little follies of Constantia.

“I think the girl reads too much, and sits with her eyes too wide open, Martha ;--is rather unsocial, likewise. She wanted to get out of the way of the weddings, and positively refused to be Angeline's bridesmaid.”

“Ah !” sighed Martha, “that's it. Poor foolish child, to think of falling in love”—

I almost jumped off my chair. “I'll not hear a word of it—I declare I will not ! I'll keep the young fellow off my premises with man-traps and spring-guns. I'll go back to India if you tell me of another “engagement.”

“No chance of that ;” and Martha shook her head more drearily than ever. “Poor child, I fear it is an unfortunate attachment !”

I brightened up—so much so, that my sister looked, nay, gently hinted, her conviction that I was a “brute.” She expected I would have been as sorry as she was !

“No, Martha ; I am rather glad. Glad, after my experience of these ‘fortunate’ love-affairs, to find that one of my sisters has the womanly courage, unselfishness, and simplicity to conceive an ‘unfortunate’ attachment.”

Perhaps this speech hurt Martha, and yet it need not. She and I both knew and respected one another's youth ; and if we differed in opinion concerning our middle age, why—I was as likely to be wrong as she.

She did not at first reply ; and then, without comment, she explained to me her uneasiness about Constantia. The girl had long played confidante to Mr Archer in the matter of Angeline, and, as often happens, the confidante had unwittingly taken too great interest in one of her principals, until she found herself envying the lot of the other. When Mr Archer's dismissal finally broke off all his intercourse with our family, there was one of my sisters who missed him wearily, cruelly ; and that was—not Angeline.

I was touched. Now, no doubt Constantia had been very foolish ; no doubt she had nourished and encouraged this fancy, as romantic girls do, in moonlight walks and solitary dreams ; hugging her pain, and deluding herself that it was bliss. Little doubt, likewise, that the feeling would wear itself out, or fade slowly away in life's stern truths ; but at present it was a most sincere passion, sad and

sore. Foolish and romantic as it might be, in itself and in its girlish demonstrations, I could not smile at it. It was a real thing, and as such to be respected.

Martha and I held counsel together, and acted on the result. We took Constantia under our especial charge; we gave her books to read, visits to pay, work to do; keeping her as much as possible with one or other of us, and out of the way of the childish flirtation of Cuthbert and Charlotte, or the formal philandering of Sir Rowland and the future Lady Griffith Jones. And if sometimes, as Lizzie told me—my little Lizzie, who laughed at love and lovers with the lightness of sixteen—Constantia grew impatient with Lotty's careless trifling, and curled her lip scornfully when Angeline paraded the splendours of her *trousseau*, we tried to lead the girl's mind out of herself, and out of dreamland altogether, as much as possible.

“But suppose,” Lizzie sagely argued—“suppose, when Angeline is married, Mr Archer should come back? He always liked Constantia extremely. Who knows but”——

I shook my head, and desired the little castle-builder to hold her tongue.

She was our sole sharer of the secret ; and I must say, though she laughed at her now and then, Lizzie was extremely loving and patient with Constantia. After a time, we left the two girls wholly to one another, more especially as my time was now taken up with my friend Launceston.

O the comfort, the relief, of the society of a man !—a real honest man—who had some sterling aim and object in life—some steady work to do—some earnest interest in the advance of the world, the duties and pursuits of his brother men : who was neither handsome, witty, nor accomplished ; who rarely shone in ladies' society ; in fact, rather eschewed it than otherwise. For, he said, nature had unfitted him to act the part of a mere admirer, and adverse fortune forbade him to appear in the character of a lover ; so he held aloof, keeping his own company and that of one or two old friends like myself.

I was fond of Launceston ; I wished my family to like him too ; but they were all too busy about their own affairs. Evening after

evening, I could not get any of my sisters to make tea for us, or give us a little music afterwards, except the pale, dull-looking Constantia, or my bonny rose of June, little Lizzie. At last, we four settled into a small daily company, and went out together, read together, talked together continually. I kept these two younger ones as much as possible in our unromantic practical society, that not only my mind, but Launceston's, in its thorough cheerfulness and healthiness of tone, might unconsciously have a good influence upon Constantia.

The girl's spirit slowly began to heal. She set aside her dreaming, and took with all the energy of her nature to active work—women's work—charity school-teaching, village-visiting, and the like. She put a little too much "romance" into all she did still; but there was life in it, truth, sincerity.

"Miss Constantia will make an admirable lady-of-all-work," said Launceston in his quaint way, watching her with his kindly and observant eyes. "The world wants such. She will find enough to do."

And so she did: enough to steal her too from my side, almost as much as the three

fiancées. The circle in my study dwindled gradually down to Lizzie, Launceston, and me.

We were excellent company still, we three. I had rarely had so much of my pet sister's society : I had never found it so pleasant. True, she was shyer than usual, probably from being with us two, older and wiser people—men likewise—but she listened to our wisdom so sweetly—she bore with our dry, long-worded learning so patiently—that my study never seemed itself unless I had the little girl seated at my feet, or sewing quietly in the window-corner. And then she was completely a “little girl;” had no forward ways—no love notions, or, ten times worse, marriage-notions, crossing her innocent brain. I felt sure I could take her into my closest heart, form her mind and principles at my will, and one day make a noble woman of her, after the pattern of—— But I never mention *that* sacred name.

I loved Lizzie—loved her to the core of my heart. Sometimes with fatherly more than even brotherly pride, I used to talk to Launceston of the child's sweetnesses, but he always gave

me short answers. It was his way. His laconism in most things was really astonishing, for a man under thirty.

One day, when Angeline's grand wedding was safely over, and the house had sunk into a pathetic quietness that reminded one of the evening after a funeral—at least so I thought—Launceston and I fell into a discussion, which stirred him into more demonstrativeness than usual. The subject was men, women, and marriages.

“I am convinced,” he said, “that I shall never marry.”

It was not my first hearing of this laudable determination; so I let it pass, merely asking his reasons.

“Because my conscience, principles, and feelings go totally against the system of matrimony, as practised in the world, especially the world of womankind. All the courting and proposing, the presents and the love-letters, the dinners to relatives and congratulations of friends, the marriage-guests and marriage-settlements, the white lace, white satin, and white favours, carriage, postilions, and all, Heigh-ho, Heathcote, what fools men are!”

I was just about to suggest the possibility of naming one, say two, wise individuals among our sex, when in stole a white fairy — my pretty Lizzie, in her bridesmaid's dress. Her presence changed the current of conversation; until from some remark she made about a message Angeline had left as to the proper way of inserting her marriage in the *Times* newspaper to-morrow, our talk imperceptibly fell back into the old channel.

“I, like you, Launceston, hate the whole system of love and marrying. It is one great sham. Beginning when miss, at school, learns that it is the apex of feminine honour to be a bride—the lowest deep of feminine humiliation to die an old maid. Continuing when she, a young lady at home, counts her numerous “offers;” taking pride in what ought to be to her a source either of regret or humiliation. Ending when, time slipping by, she drops into the usual belief that nobody ever marries her first love; so takes the best match she can find, and makes marriage, which is merely the visible crown and completion of love, the pitiful dishonoured substitute for it. I declare solemnly, I have seen many a wife whom I held to be scarcely better than—no wife at all.”

I had forgotten my little sister's presence; but she did not seem to hear me—nor Launceston either, for that matter. His earnestness had softened down; he sat, very thoughtful, over against the window where Lizzie had taken her sewing.—What a pretty picture she made!

"Come here, my little girl," I said; "I should not like thee to go the way of the world; and yet I should be satisfied to give thee away some day, quietly, in a white muslin gown and a straw-bonnet, to some honest man who loved thee,—and was loved so well, that Lizzie would never dream of marrying any other, but would have been quite content, if need be, to live an old maid for his sake to the end of her days. That's what *I* call love—eh, my girl?"

Lizzie drooped her head, blushing deeply. Of course; girls always do.

Launceston said, in a tone so low that I quite started: "Then you do believe in true love, after all?"

"It would be ill for me, or for any human being—if I did not. And I believe in it the more earnestly because of its numberless counterfeits. Nay"—and now when, after this gay marriage-

morning, the evening was sinking gray and dull, my mind inclined pensively, even tenderly, to the sister who had gone, the other two sisters who were shortly going away, from my hearth for ever—"nay, as since in the falsest creeds there lurks, I hope, a modicum of absolute truth, I would fain trust that in the poorest travesty or masquerade of love, one might find a fragment of the sterling commodity. Still, my Lizzie, dear, when all our brides are gone, let us congratulate ourselves that for a long time we shall have no more engagements."

"You object to engagements?" said Lizzie, speaking timidly and downfaced—as I rather like to see a young girl speak on this subject.

"Why, how should you like it yourself, my little maid? To be loved, wooed, and wedded, in public, for the benefit of an amused circle of friends, neighbours, and connections. To have one's actions noticed, one's affairs canvassed, one's feelings weighed and measured; to be congratulated, condoled, and jested with. Horrible! literally horrible. My wonder is that any true lovers can ever stand it."

"Perhaps you are right," said Launceston,

vehemently. "No man ought to place the girl he loves in such a position. Whatever it costs him, he ought to leave her free—altogether free—and offer her nothing until he can offer her his hand, at once, and with no delay."

"Bless my soul, Launceston, what are you in such excitement about? Has anybody been offering himself to *your* sister? Because—you mistook me. Ask her, or Lizzie, or any good woman, if they would feel flattered by a gentleman's acting in the way you suggest? As if his hand—with the ring in it—were everything to them, and himself and his true love nothing at all!"

Launceston laughed uneasily. "Well, but what did you mean? A—a friend of mine would like to know your opinion on this matter."

"My opinion is simply—an opinion. Every man is the best judge of his own affairs, especially love-affairs. As the Eastern proverb says: "Let not the lions decide for the tigers." But I think, did *I* love a woman"—(and it pleased me to know I was but speaking out *her* mind who years ago lived and died, in

her fond simplicity wiser than any of these)—“did I love a woman, I would like to tell her so—just to herself, no more. I would like to give her my love to rest on—to receive the help and consolation of hers. I would like her to feel that through all chances and changes she and I were *one*; one, neither for foolish child’s-play nor headlong passion, but for mutual strength and support, holding ourselves responsible both to Heaven and each other for our life and our love. One, indissolubly, whether we were ever married or not; one in this world, and—we pray—one in the world everlasting.”

Was I dreaming? Did I actually see my friend Launceston take, unforbidden, my youngest sister’s hand, and hold it—firmly, tenderly, fast? Did I hear, with my own natural ears, Lizzie’s soft little sob, not of grief certainly, as she slipped out of the room, as swift and silent as a moonbeam?

Eh! what? Good heavens! Was there ever any creature so blind as a middle-aged elder brother!

Well, as I told Launceston, it was half my own fault; and I must bear it stoically. Perhaps, on the whole, things might have been

worse, for he is a noble fellow, and no wonder the child loves him. They cannot be married just yet—meanwhile, Lizzie and I keep the matter between ourselves. They are very happy—God bless them! and so am I.

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P.S.—Mr Archer reappeared yesterday—looking quite well and comfortable! I see clearly that, one day not distant, I shall be left lamenting—the solitary residuum of a Family in Love.

THE END.

A L O W M A R R I A G E .

A LOW MARRIAGE.



CHAPTER I.

MRS ROCHDALE stood a good while talking at the school-gate this morning—Mrs Rochdale, my mistress once, my friend now. My cousin, the village schoolmistress, was bemoaning over her lad George, now fighting in the Crimea, saying, poor body, “that no one could understand her feelings but a mother—a mother with an only son.”

Mrs Rochdale smiled—that peculiar smile of one who has bought peace through the “constant anguish of patience”—a look which I can still trace in her face at times, and which I suppose will never wholly vanish thence. We changed the conversation, and she shortly afterwards departed.

—A mother with an only son. All the neighbourhood knew the story of our Mrs Rochdale and *her* son. But it had long ceased to be discussed, at least openly; though still it was told under the seal of confidence to every new-comer in our village. And still every summer I used to see any strangers who occupied my cousin's lodgings staring with all their eyes when the manor-house carriage passed by, or peeping from over the blinds to catch a glimpse of Mrs Rochdale.

No wonder. She is, both to look at and to know, a woman among a thousand.

It can do no possible harm—it may do good—if I here write down her history.

First let me describe her, who even yet seems to me the fairest woman I ever knew. And why should not a woman be fair at sixty? Because the beauty that lasts till then,—and it can last, for I have seen it,—must be of the noblest and most satisfying kind, wholly independent of form or colouring;—a beauty such as a young woman can by no art attain, but which, once attained, no woman need ever fear to lose, till the coffin-lid, closing over its

last and loveliest smile, makes of it "a joy for ever."

Mrs Rochdale was tall—too tall in youth ; but your well-statured women have decidedly the advantage after forty. Her features, more soft than strong,—looking softer still under the smooth-banded gray hair—might have been good : I am no artist : I do not know. But it was not that ; it was the intangible nameless grace which surrounded her as with an atmosphere, making her presence in a room like light, and her absence like its loss ; her soft but stately courtesy of mien, in word and motion alike harmonious. Silent, her gentle ease of manner made every one else at ease. Speaking, though she was by no means a great talker, she always seemed instinctively to say just the right thing, to the right person, at the right moment, in the right way. She stood out distinct from all your "charming creatures," "most lady-like persons," "very talented women," as that rarest species of the whole race—a gentlewoman.

At twenty-three she became Mr Rochdale's wife ; at twenty-five his widow. From that time her whole life was devoted to the son

who, at a twelvemonth old, was already Lemuel Rochdale, Esquire, lord of the manor of Thorpe and Stretton-Magna, owner of one of the largest estates in the county. Poor little baby!

He was the puniest, sickliest baby she ever saw, I have heard my mother say; but he grew up into a fine boy and a handsome youth; not unlike Mrs Rochdale, except that a certain hereditary pride of manner, which in her was almost beautiful—if any pride can be beautiful,—was in him exaggerated to self-assurance and haughtiness. He was the principal person in the establishment while he yet trundled hoops; and long before he discarded jackets had assumed his position as sole master of the manor-house—allowing, however, his mother to remain as sole mistress.

He loved her very much, I think—better than horses, dogs, or guns; swore she was the kindest and dearest mother in England, and handsomer ten times over than any girl he knew.

At which the smiling mother would shake her head in credulous incredulousness. She rarely burdened him with caresses; perhaps

she had found out early that boys dislike them—at least he did: to others she always spoke of him as “my son,” or “Mr Rochdale;” and her pride in him, or praise of him, was always more by implication than by open word. Yet all the house, all the village, knew quite well how things were. And though they were not often seen together, except on Sundays, when, year after year, she walked up the church-aisle, holding her little son by the hand; then, followed by the sturdy school-boy; finally, leaning proudly on the youth’s proud arm,—every body said emphatically that the young squire was “his mother’s own son;” passionately beloved, after the fashion of women ever since young Eve smiled down on Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man from the Lord.”

So he grew up to be twenty-one years old.

On that day Mrs Rochdale, for the first time since her widowhood, opened her house, and invited all the country round. The morning was devoted to the poorer guests; in the evening there was a dinner-party and ball.

I dressed her, having since my girlhood been to her a sort of amateur milliner and lady’s-maid. I may use the word “amateur”

in its strictest sense, since it was out of the great love and reverence I had for her that I had got into this habit of haunting the manor-house. And since love begets love, and we always feel kindly to those we have been kind to, Mrs Rochdale was fond of me. Through her means, and still more through herself, I gained a better education than I should have done as only her bailiff's daughter. But that is neither here nor there.

Mrs Rochdale was standing before the glass in her black velvet gown; she never wore any thing but black, with sometimes a gray or lilac ribbon. She had taken out from that casket, and was clasping on her arms and neck, white and round even at five-and-forty, some long-unworn family jewels.

I admired them very much.

"Yes, they are pretty. But I scarcely like to see myself in diamonds, Martha. I shall only wear them a few times, and then resign them to my daughter-in-law."

"Your daughter-in-law? Has Mr Rochdale—"

"No," (smiling) "Mr Rochdale has not made his choice yet; but I hope he will ere

long. A young man should marry early, especially a young man of family and fortune. I shall be very glad when my son has chosen his wife."

She spoke as if she thought he had nothing to do but to choose, after the fashion of kings and sultans.

I smiled. She misinterpreted my thought, saying with some little severity:

"Martha, you mistake. I repeat, I shall be altogether glad, even if such a chance were to happen to-day."

Ah, Mrs Rochdale, was ever any widowed mother of an only son "altogether glad" when first startled into the knowledge that she herself was not his all in the world? that some strange woman had risen up, for whose sake he was bound to "leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife?" A righteous saying, but hard to be understood at first by the mothers.

It afterwards struck me as an odd coincidence, that what Mrs Rochdale had wished might happen did actually happen that same night.

The prettiest, and beyond all question the

“sweetest,” girl in all our county families,—among which alone it was probable or permissible that our young squire should “throw the handkerchief,” — was Miss Celandine Childe, niece and heiress of Sir John Childe. I was caught by her somewhat fanciful name,—after Wordsworth’s flower,—which, as I overheard Mrs Rochdale say, admirably expressed her.

I thought so too, when, peeping through the curtained ballroom-door, I caught sight of her, distinct among all the young ladies, as one’s eye lights upon a celandine in a spring meadow. She was smaller than any lady in the room—very fair, with yellow hair—the only real gold hair I ever saw. Her head drooped like a flower-cup; and her motions, always soft and quiet, reminded one of the stirrings of a flower in the grass. Her dress—as if to humour the fancy, or else Nature herself did so by making that colour most suitable to the girl’s complexion—was some gauzy stuff, of a soft pale-green. Bright, delicate, innocent, and fair, you could hardly look at her without wishing to take her up in your bosom like a flower.

The ball was a great success. Mrs Rochdale came up to her dressing-room long after midnight, but with the bright glow of maternal pride still burning on her cheeks. She looked quite young again, forcing one to acknowledge the fact constantly avouched by the elder generation, that our mothers and grandmothers were a great deal handsomer than we. Certainly, not a belle in the ball-room could compare with Mrs Rochdale in my eyes. I should have liked to have told her so. In a vague manner I said something which slightly approximated to my thought.

Mrs Rochdale answered, innocent of the compliment, "Yes, I have seen very lovely women in my youth. But to-night my son pointed out several whom he admired—one in particular."

"Was it Miss Childe, madam?"

"How acute you are, little Martha! How could you see that?"

I answered, rather deprecatingly, that, from the corner where I was serving ices, I had heard several people remark Mr Rochdale's great attention to Miss Childe.

“Indeed!” with a slight sharpness of accent. A moment or two after she added, with some *hauteur*, “You mistake, my dear; Mr Rochdale could never be so uncourteous as to pay exclusive attention to any one of his guests; but Miss Childe is a stranger in the neighbourhood.” After a pause: “She is a most sweet-looking girl. My son said so to me, and—I perfectly agreed with him.”

I let the subject drop—nor did Mrs Rochdale resume it.

A month after I wondered if she knew what all the servants at the manor-house and all the villagers at Thorpe soon knew quite well, and discussed incessantly in butler’s pantries and kitchens, over pots of ale and by cottage-doors—that our young squire from that day forward gave up his shooting, his otter-hunting, and even his coursing, and “went a-courting” sedulously for a whole month to Ashen Dale.

Meanwhile Sir John and Miss Childe came twice to luncheon. I saw her, pretty creature! walking by Mrs Rochdale’s side to feed the swans, and looking more like a flower than ever. And once, stately in the family-

coach, which tumbled over the rough roads; two hours there and two hours back, shaking the old coachman almost to pieces, did Mrs and Mr Rochdale drive over to a formal dinner at Ashen Dale.

Finally, in the Christmas-week, after an interval of twenty lonely Christmasses past and gone, did our lady of the manor prepare to pay to the same place a three-days' visit—such as is usual among county families—the “rest-day, the pressed-day,” and the day of departure.

I was at the door when she came home. Her usually bright and healthy cheeks were somewhat pale, and her eyes glittered; but her eyelids were heavy, as with long pressing back of tears. Mr Rochdale did not drive, but sat beside her; he too seemed rather grave. He handed her out of the carriage carefully and tenderly. She responded with a fond smile. Mother and son went up the broad staircase arm-in-arm.

That night the servants who had gone to Ashen Dale talked “it” all over with the servants who had stayed at home; and every point was satisfactorily settled, down to the

bride's fortune and pin-money, and whether she would be married in Brussels or Honiton lace.

Yet still Mrs Rochdale said nothing. She looked happy, but pale, constantly pale. The squire was in the gayest spirits imaginable. He was, as I have said, a very handsome and winning young fellow; rather variable in his tastes, and easily guided, some people said—but then it was always the old who said it, and nobody minded them. We thought Miss Celandine Childe was the happiest and luckiest girl imaginable.

She looked so when, after due time, the three-days' visit was returned; after which Sir John departed, and Miss Childe stayed behind.

That evening—it was just the time of year when “evenings” begin to be perceptible, and in passing the drawing-room door I had heard the young master say something to Miss Childe about “primroses in the woods”—that evening I was waiting upon Mrs Rochdale's toilet. She herself stood at the oriel window. It was after dinner—she had come up to her room to rest.

“Look here, Martha.”

She pointed to the terrace-walk leading to the pool. There were the two young people sauntering slowly past—he gazing down on her, she with her eyes drooped low, low to the very ground. But her arm rested in his, in a safe, happy, clinging way, as knowing it had a right there to rest for ever.

“It is so, Mrs Rochdale?”

“Ay, Martha. What do you think of my—my children?”

A few tears came to her eyes,—a few quivers fluttered over and about her mouth; but she gazed still—she smiled still.

“Are you satisfied, madam?”

“Quite. It is the happiest thing in the world—for him. They will be married at Christmas.”

“And you—”

She put her hands softly on my lips, and said, smiling, “Plenty of time to think of that—plenty of time.”

After this day she gradually grew less pale, and recovered entirely her healthy, cheerful tone of mind. It was evident that she

soon began to love her daughter elect very much—as indeed, who could help it?—and that by no means as a mere matter of form had she called them both “my children.”

For Celandine, who had never known a mother, it seemed as if Mrs Rochdale were almost as dear to her as her betrothed. The two ladies were constantly together; and in them the proverbially formidable and all but impossible possibility bade fair to be realised, of a mother and daughter-in-law as united as if they were of the same flesh and blood.

The gossips shook their heads and said, “It would’nt last.” I think it would. Why should it not? They were two noble, tender, unselfish women. Either was ready to love any thing he loved—to renounce anything to make him happy. In him, the lover and son, was their meeting-point, in him they learned to love one another.

Strange that women cannot always see this. Strange that a girl should not, above all but her own mother, cling to the mother of him she loves—the woman who has borne him, nursed him, cherished him, suffered for him more than any living creature can suffer, ex-

cepting—ay, sometimes not even excepting—his wife. Most strange, that a mother, who would be fond and kind to any thing her boy cared for,—his horse or his dog,—should not, above all, love the creature he loves best in the world, on whom his happiness, honour, and peace, are staked for a lifetime. Alas, that a bond so simple, natural, holy, should be found so hard as to be almost impossible—even among the good women of this world! Mothers, wives,—whose fault is it? Is it because each exacts too much for herself, and too little for the other,—one forgetting that she was ever young, the other that she will one day be old? Or that in the tenderest women's devotion lurks a something of jealousy, which blinds them to the truth—as true in love as in charity—that “it is more blessed to give than to receive”? Perhaps I, Martha Stretton, spinster, have no right to discuss this question. But one thing I will say: that I can forgive much to an unloved daughter-in-law,—to an unloving one, *nothing*.

And now, from this long digression,—

which is not so irrelevant as it at first may seem,—let me return to my story.

The year grew and waned. Mrs Rochdale said to me, when it was near its closing, that it had been one of the happiest years she had ever known.

I believe it was. The more so as, like many a season of great happiness, it began with a conquered pang. But of this no one ever dared to hint ; and perhaps the mother now would hardly have acknowledged, even to herself, that it had temporarily existed.

CHAPTER II.

THE young people were to have been married at Christmas ; but early in December the long-invalided Lady Childe died. This deferred the wedding. The lover said, loudly and often, that it was "very hard." The bride-elect said nothing at all. Consequently every lady's-maid and woman-servant at the manor-house, and every damsel down the village, talked over Miss Childe's hard-heartedness ; especially as, soon after, she went travelling with poor broken-hearted Sir John Childe, thereby parting with her betrothed for three whole months.

But I myself watched her about the manor-house the last few days before she went away. O Lemuel Rochdale, what had you deserved, that heaven should bless you with the love of two such women—mother and bride !

Celandine went away. The manor-house was very dull after she was gone. Mrs Rochdale said she did not wonder that her son was absent a good deal—it was natural. But this she only said to me. To others, she never took any notice of his absence at all.

These absences continued,—lengthened. In most young men they would have been unremarked; but Lemuel was so fondly attached to his mother, that he rarely in his life had spent his evenings away from home and her. Now, in the wild March nights, in the soft April twilights, in the May moonlights, Mrs Rochdale sat alone in the great drawing-room, where they had sat so happily last year—all three of them.

She sat, grave and quiet, over her book or her knitting, still saying—if she ever said any thing—that it was quite “natural” her son should amuse himself abroad.

Once I heard her ask him, “Where he had been to-night?”

He hesitated; then said, “Up the village, mother.”

“What, again? How fond you are of moonlight walks up the village!”

“Am I?” whipping his boots with his cane. “Why, mother, moonlight is—very pretty, you know; and the evenings here are—so long.”

“True.” His mother half sighed. “But soon, you know, Celandine will be back.”

It might have been my mistake, but I thought the young man turned scarlet, as, whistling his dog, he hastily quitted the room.

“How sensitive these lovers are!” said Mrs Rochdale, smiling. “He can hardly bear to hear her name. I do wish they were married.”

But that wish was still further deferred. Sir John Childe, fretful, ailing, begged another six months before he lost his niece. They were young; and he was old, and had not long to live. Besides, thus safely and happily betrothed, why should they not wait? A year more or less was of little moment to those who were bound together firm and sure, in good and ill, for a life-time. Nay, did she not from the very day of her betrothal feel herself Lemuel’s faithful wife?

Thus, Mrs Rochdale told me, did Celandine urge—out of the love which in its completeness hardly recognised such a thing as separation. Her mother that was to be, reading the passage

out of her letter, paused, silenced by starting tears.

The lover consented to this further delay. He did not once say that it was "very hard." Again Mrs Rochdale began to talk, but with a tone of fainter certainty, about their being married next Christmas.

Meanwhile the young squire appeared quite satisfied ; shot, fished, lounged about his property as usual, and kept up his spirits amazingly.

He likewise took his moonlight walks up the village with creditable persistency. Once or twice I heard it whispered about that he did not take them alone.

But every one in the neighbourhood so liked the young squire, and so tenderly honoured his mother, that it was some time before the faintest of these ill whispers reached the ear of Mrs Rochdale.

I never shall forget the day she heard it.

She had sent for me to help her in gathering her grapes ; a thing she often liked to do herself, giving the choice bunches to her own friends, and to the sick poor of her neighbours. She was standing in the vinery when I came.

One moment's glance showed me something was amiss, but she stopped the question ere it was well out of my lips.

"No, nothing, Martha. This bunch—cut it while I hold it."

But her hand shook so that the grapes fell and were crushed, dyeing purple the stone-floor. I picked them up—she took no notice.

Suddenly she put her hand to her head. "I am tired. We will do this another day."

I followed her across the garden to the hall-door. Entering, she gave orders to have the carriage ready immediately.

"I will take you home, Martha. I am going to the village."

Now the village was about two miles distant from the manor-house,—a mere cluster of cottages ; among which were only three decent dwellings—the butcher's, the baker's, and the schoolhouse. Mrs Rochdale rarely drove through Thorpe,—still more rarely did she stop there.

She stopped now—it was some message at the schoolhouse. Then, addressing the coachman,—

"Drive on—to the baker's shop."

Old John started—touched his hat hurriedly. I saw him and the footman whispering on the box. Well I could guess why!

“The baker’s, Mrs Rochdale?—Cannot I call?—Indeed, it is a pity you should take that trouble.”

She looked me full in the face;—I felt myself turn crimson.

“Thank you, Martha; but I wish to go myself.”

I ceased. But I was now quite certain she knew, and guessed I knew also, that which all the village were now talking about. What could be her motive for acting thus? Was it to show her own ignorance of the report? No, that would have been to imply a falsehood; and Mrs Rochdale was stanchly, absolutely true in deed as in word. Or was it to prove them all liars and scandal-mongers, that the lady of the manor drove up openly to the very door where—

Mrs Rochdale startled me from my thoughts with her sudden voice, sharp and clear.

“He is a decent man, I believe,—Hine, the baker?”

“Yes, madam.”

“He has—a daughter, who—waits in the shop?”

“Yes, madam.”

She pulled the check-string with a quick jerk, and got out. Two small burning spots were on either cheek; otherwise she looked herself—her tall, calm, stately self.

I wondered what Nancy thought of her—handsome Nancy Hine, who was laughing in her free loud way behind the counter, but who, perceiving the manor-house carriage, stopped, startled.

I could see them quite plainly through the shop-window—the baker’s daughter and the mother of the young squire. I could see the very glitter in Mrs Rochdale’s eyes, as, giving in her ordinary tone some domestic order, she took the opportunity of gazing steadily at the large, well-featured girl, who stood awkward and painfully abashed, nay, blushing scarlet; though people did say that Nancy Hine was too clever a girl to have blushed since she was out of her teens.

I think they belied her—I think many people belied her, both then and afterward. She was “clever”—much cleverer than most

girls of her station; she looked bold and determined enough, but neither unscrupulous nor insincere.

During the interview, which did not last two minutes, I thought it best to stay outside the door. Of course, when Mrs Rochdale re-entered the carriage, I made no remark. Nor did she.

She gave me the cake for the school-children. From the wicket I watched her drive off, just catching through the carriage-window her profile, so proudly cut, so delicate and refined.

That a young man, born and reared of such a mother, with a lovely fairy creature like Celandine for his own, his very own, could ever lower his tastes, habits, perceptions, to court—people said even to win—unlawfully, a common village-girl, handsome, indeed, but with the coarse blousy beauty which at thirty might be positive ugliness—surely—surely it was impossible! It could not be true what they said about young Mr Rochdale and Nancy Hine.

I did not think his mother believed it either; if she had, could she have driven away with that quiet smile on her mouth,

left by her last kind words to the school children and to me?

The young squire had gone to Scotland the day before this incident occurred. He did not seem in any hurry to return; not even when, by some whim of the old baronet's, Sir John Childe and his niece suddenly returned to Ashen Dale.

Mrs Rochdale drove over there immediately, and brought Celandine back with her. The two ladies, elder and younger, were gladly seen by us all, going about together in their old happy ways, lingering in the greenhouse, driving and walking, laughing their well-known merry laugh when they fed the swans of an evening in the pool.

There might have been no such things in the world as tale-bearers, slanderers, or—bakers' daughters.

Alas! this was only for four bright days—the last days when I ever saw Mrs Rochdale looking happy and young, or Celandine Childe light-hearted and bewitchingly fair.

On the fifth, Sir John Childe's coach drove up to the manor-house, not lazily, as it generally did, but with ominously thundering

wheels. He and Mrs Rochdale were shut up in the library for two full hours. Then she came out, walking heavily, with a kind of mechanical strength, but never once drooping her head or her eyes, and desired me to go and look for Miss Childe, who was reading in the summer-house. She waited at the hall-door till the young lady came in.

“Mamma!” Already she had begun, by Mrs Rochdale’s wish, to give her that fond name. But it seemed to strike painfully now.

“Mamma, is anything the matter?” and, turning pale, the girl clung to her arm.

“Nothing to alarm you, my pet; nothing that I care for—not I. I know it is false—wholly false; it could not but be.” Her tone, warm with excitement, had nevertheless more anger in it than fear. Celandine’s colour returned.

“If it be false, mamma, never mind it,” she said in her fondling way. “But what is this news?”

“Something that your uncle has heard. Something he insists upon telling you. Let him. It cannot matter either to you or to me. Come, my child.”

What passed in the library of course never transpired ; but about an hour after I was sent for to Mrs Rochdale's dressing-room.

She sat at her writing-table. There was a firm, hard, almost fierce expression in her eyes, very painful to see. Yet when Celandine glided in, with that soft step and white face, Mrs Rochdale looked up with a quick smile.

"Has he read it? Is he satisfied with it?" and she took, with painfully assumed carelessness, a letter newly written, which Miss Childe brought to her.

The girl assented ; then, kneeling by the table, pressed her cheek upon Mrs Rochdale's shoulder.

"Let me write, mamma, just one little line, to tell him that I—that I don't believe —"

"Hush !" and the trembling lips were shut with a kiss tender as firm. "No ; not a line, my little girl. I, his mother, may speak of such things to him. Not you."

It did at the moment seem to me almost sickening that this pure fragile flower of a girl should ever have been told there existed such

wickedness as that of which not only Sir John Childe, but the whole neighbourhood now accused her lover ; and which, as I afterwards learned, the baronet insisted should be at once openly and explicitly denied by Mr Rochdale, or the engagement must be held dissolved.

This question his mother claimed her own sole right to put to her son ; and she had put it in the letter, which now, with a steady hand and a fixed smile—half-contemptuous as it were—she was sealing and directing.

“ Martha, put this into the post-bag yourself ; and tell Miss Childe’s maid her mistress will remain another week at the manor-house. Yes, my love, best so.”

Then, sitting down wearily in the large arm-chair, Mrs Rochdale drew Celandine to her ; and I saw her take the soft small figure on her lap, like a child, and fold her up close in the grave, comforting silence of inexpressible love.

It was a four-days’ post to and from the moors where Mr Rochdale was staying. Heavily the time must have passed with those two poor women, whose all was staked

upon him—upon his one little “yes” or “no.”

Sunday intervened, when they both appeared at church—evening as well as morning. With this exception, they did not go out; and were seen but rarely about the house, except at dinner-time. Then, with her companion on her arm, Mrs Rochdale would walk down, and take her seat at the foot of the long dreary dining-table, placing Miss Childe on her right hand.

The old butler said it made his heart ache to see how sometimes they both looked towards the head of the board—at the empty chair there.

The fifth day came and passed. No letters. The sixth likewise. In the evening, his mother ordered Mr Rochdale’s chamber to be got ready, as it was “not improbable” he might unexpectedly come home. But he did not come.

They sat up half that night, I believe, both Mrs Rochdale and Miss Childe.

Next morning they breakfasted together as usual in the dressing-room. As I crossed the plantation—for in my anxiety I made

business at the manor-house every day now—I saw them both sitting at the window, waiting for the post.

Waiting for the post! Many a one has known that heart-sickening intolerable time; but few waitings have been like to theirs.

The stable-boy came lazily up, swinging the letter-bag to and fro in his hands. They saw it from the window.

The butler unlocked the bag as usual, and distributed the contents.

“Here’s one from the young master. Lord bless us, what a big un!”

“Let me take it upstairs, William.” For I saw it was addressed to Miss Childe.

Mechanically, as I went up stairs, my eye rested on the direction, in Mr Rochdale’s large careless hand; and on the seal, firm and clear, bearing not the sentimental devices he had once been fond of using, but his business-seal—his coat-of-arms. With a heavy weight on my heart, I knocked at the dressing-room door.

Miss Childe opened it.

“Ah, mamma, for *me*, for *me*!” And

with a sob of joy she caught and tore open the large envelope.

Out of it fell a heap of letters—her own pretty dainty letters, addressed “Lemuel Rochdale, Esq.”

She stood looking down at them with a bewildered air; then searched through the envelope. It was blank—quite blank.

“*What* does he mean, mamma? I—don’t—understand.”

But Mrs Rochdale did. “Go away, Martha,” she said hoarsely, shutting me out at the door. And then I heard a smothered cry, and something falling to the floor like a stone.

CHAPTER III.

THE ladies did not appear at lunch. Word was sent down stairs that Miss Childe was "indisposed." I could not by any means get to see Mrs Rochdale, though I hung about the house all day. Near dark I received a message that the mistress wanted me.

She was sitting in the dining-room, without lights. She sat as quiet, as motionless, as a carved figure. I dared not speak to her; I trembled to catch the first sound of her voice—my friend, my mistress, my dear Mrs Rochdale!

"Martha!"

"Yes, madam."

"I wish, Martha"—and there the voice stopped.

I hardly know what prevented my saying or doing, on the impulse, things that the

commonest instinct told me, the moment afterwards, ought to be said and done by no one—certainly not by me—at this crisis, to Mrs Rochdale. So, with an effort, I stood silent in the dim light—as silent and motionless as herself.

“I wish, Martha”—and her voice was steady now—“I wish to send you on a message, which requires some one whom I can implicitly trust.”

My heart was at my lips ; but of course I only said, “Yes, madam.”

“I want you to go down to the village, to the—the—young person at the baker’s shop.

“Nancy Hine.”

“Is that her name? Yes, I remember; Nancy Hine. Bring her here—to the manor-house; without observation, if you can.”

“To-night, madam?”

“To-night. Make any excuse you choose; or rather, make no excuse at all. Say Mrs Rochdale wishes to speak to her.”

“Anything more?” I asked softly, after a considerable pause.

“Nothing more. Go at once, Martha.”

I obeyed implicitly. Much as this my

mission had surprised, nay, startled me, I knew Mrs Rochdale always did what was wisest, best to do, under the circumstances. Also, that her combined directness of purpose and strength of character often led her to do things utterly unthought of by a weaker or less single-hearted woman.

Though a misty September moonlight, I walked blindly on in search of Nancy Hine.

She was having a lively gossip at the bake-house-door. The fire showed her figure plainly. Her large rosy arms, whitened with flour, were crossed over her decent working-gown. People allowed—even the most censorious—that Nancy was, in her own home, an active industrious lass, though too much given to dress of Sundays, and holding herself rather above her station every day.

“Nancy Hine, I want to speak with you a minute.”

“O, do you, Martha Stretton? Speak out, then. No secrets here.”

Her careless, not to say rude, manner irritated me. I just turned away and walked down the village. I had not gone many

yards when Nancy's hand was on my shoulder ; and with a loud laugh at my sudden start, she pulled me by a back door into the shop.

“ Now then ? ”

The baker's daughter folded her arms in a rather defiant way. Her eyes were bright and open. There was in her manner some excitement, coarseness, and boldness ; but nothing unvirtuous—nothing to mark the fallen girl whom her neighbours were pointing the finger at. I could not loath her quite as much as I had intended.

“ Now then ? ” she repeated.

I delivered Mrs Rochdale's message, word for word.

Nancy seemed a good deal surprised—not shocked, or alarmed, or ashamed—merely surprised.

“ Wants me, does she ? Why ? ”

“ She did not say.”

“ But you guess, of course. Well, who cares ? Not I.”

Yet her brown handsome face changed colour. Her hands nervously fidgeted about—taking off her apron, “ making herself

decent," as she called it. Suddenly she stopped.

"Has there been any letter—any news—from young Mr Rochdale."

"I believe there has; but that is no business of—"

"Mine, you mean, eh? Come, don't be so sharp, Martha Stretton. I'll go with you, only let me put on my best bonnet first."

"Nancy Hine," I burst out, "do you think it can matter to Mrs Rochdale whether you go in a queen's gown or a beggar's rags, except that the rags might suit you best? Come as you are."

"I will," cried Nancy, glaring in my face; "and you, Martha, keep a civil tongue, will you? My father's daughter is as good as you, or your mistress either. Get out of the shop. I'll follow 'ee. I bean't afeard."

That broad accent—broadening as she got angry—those abrupt awkward gestures!—what could the young squire, his mother's son, who had lived with that dear mother all his days, have seen attractive in Nancy Hine?

But similar anomalies of tastes have puzzled and will, puzzle, everybody—especially women, who in their attachments generally see clearer and deeper than men—to the end of time.

Nancy Hine walked in sullen taciturnity to the manor-house. It was already late—nearly all the household were gone to bed. I left the young woman in the hall, and went up to Mrs Rochdale.

She was sitting before her dressing-room fire, absorbed in thought. In the chamber close by—in the large state-bed which Mrs Rochdale always occupied, where generations of Rochdales had been born and died—slept the gentle girl whose happiness had been so cruelly betrayed. For that the engagement was broken, and for sufficient cause, Mr Rochdale's answer, or rather non-answer, to his mother's plain letter made now certain, almost beyond a doubt.

"Hush; don't wake her," whispered Mrs Rochdale, hurriedly. "Well, Martha?"

"The young woman—shall I bring her, madam?"

"What, here?" Words cannot describe

the look of repulsion, hatred, horror, which for a moment darkened Mrs Rochdale's face. Perhaps the noblest human being, either man or woman, is born, not passionless, but with strong passions to be subjected to firm will. If at that moment—one passing moment—she could have crushed out of existence the girl who had led away her son—for Nancy was older than he, and “no fool”)—I think Mrs Rochdale would have done it.

The next instant she would have done nothing of the kind; nothing that a generous Christian woman might not do.

She rose up, saying quietly, “The young person cannot come here, Martha. Bring her into—let me see—into the drawing-room.

There, entering a few minutes after, we found Mrs Rochdale seated on one of the velvet couches, just in the light of the chandelier.

I do not suppose Nancy Hine had ever been in such a brilliant, beautiful room before. She was apparently quite stunned and dazzled by it; curtsied humbly, and stood with her arms wrapped up in her shawl, vacantly gazing about her.

Mrs Rochdale spoke. "Nancy Hine, I believe, is your name?"

"Yes, my lady. That is—um—yes, ma'am, my name is Nancy."

She came a little forwarder now, and lifted up her eyes more boldly to the sofa. In fact, they both regarded each other keenly and long—the lady of the manor and the village girl.

I observed that Mrs Rochdale had resumed her usual evening-dress, and that no trace of mental disorder was visible in her apparel—scarcely even in her countenance.

"I sent for you, Nancy Hine—(Martha, do not go away, I wish that there should be a witness to all that passes between this young woman and myself)—I sent for you on account of certain reports, more injurious to your character, if possible, than even to that of—the other person. Are you aware what reports I mean?"

"Yes, my lady, I be."

"That is an honest answer, and I like honesty," said Mrs Rochdale, after a prolonged gaze at the face, now scarlet with wholesome blushes, of the baker's daughter. With a half-sigh of relief, she went on.

"You must also be aware that I, as the mother of—that other person, can have but one motive in sending for you here,—namely, to ask a question which I more than any one else have a right to ask, and to have answered. Do you understand me?"

"Some'at."

"Nancy," she resumed, after another long gaze, as if struck by something in the young woman different from what she had expected, and led thereby to address her differently from what she had at first intended,—
"Nancy, I will be plain with you. It is not every lady—every mother, who would have spoken with you as I speak now, without anger or blame—only wishing to get from you the truth. If I believed the worst—if you were a poor girl whom my son had—had wronged, I would still have pitied you. Knowing him and now looking at you, I do *not* believe it. I believe you may have been foolish, light of conduct; but not guilty. Tell me—do tell me"—and the mother's agony broke through the lady's calm and dignified demeanour—"one word to assure me it is so!"

But Nancy Hine did not utter that word. She gave a little faint sob, and then dropped her head with a troubled awkward air, as if the presence of Lemuel's mother—speaking so kindly, and looking her through and through, was more than she could bear.

That poor mother, whom this last hope had failed, to whom her only son now appeared not only as a promise-breaker, but the systematic seducer of a girl beneath his own rank—between whom and himself could exist no mental union, no false gloss of sentiment to cover the foulness of mere sensual passion—that poor mother sank back, and put her hand over her eyes, as if she would fain henceforth shut out from her sight the whole world.

After a while, she forced herself to look at the girl once more,—who, now recovering from her momentary remorse, was busy casting admiring glances, accompanied with one or two curious smiles, around the drawing-room.

“From your silence, young woman, I must conclude that I was mistaken ; that—but I will spare you. You will have enough to

suffer. There now remains only one question which I desire—which I am compelled—to ask : How long has this—this”—she seemed to choke over the unuttered word—“lasted ?”

“Dunnot know what you mean.”

“I must speak plainer, then. How long, Nancy Hine, have you been my son’s—Mr Rochdale’s—mistress ?”

“Not a day—not an hour,” cried Nancy, violently, coming close to the sofa. “Mind what you say, Mrs Rochdale. I’m an honest girl. I’m as good as you. I’m Mr Rochdale’s *wife* !”

Mr Rochdale’s mother sat mute, and watched the girl take from a ribbon round her neck a ring—an unmistakeable wedding-ring, and slip it with a determined push on her large working-woman’s finger. This done, she thrust it right in the lady’s sight.

“Look’ee, what do ’ee say to that ? He put it there. All your anger cannot take it off. I am Mrs Lemuel Rochdale, your son’s wife.”

“Ah !” shrinking from her. But the next minute the true womanly feeling came into

the virtuous mother's heart. "Better this—than—what they said.^{me} Better a thousand times. Thank God."

With a sigh, long and deep, she sat down, and again covered her eyes, as if trying to realise the amazing—impossible truth. Then she said slowly, "Martha, I think this"—she hesitated what name to give Nancy; finally gave no name at all—"I think she had better go away."

Nancy, quite awed and moved—all her boldness gone, was creeping out of the room after me, when Mrs Rochdale called us back.

"Stay; at this hour of the night it is not fitting that—my son's wife—should be out alone. Martha, ask your father to see her safe home."

The baker's daughter turned at the door, and said, "Thank'ee, my lady;" but omitted her curtsy this time.

And Mrs Rochdale had found her daughter-in-law!

CHAPTER IV.

ERE we knew what had happened, the whole dynasty at the manor-house was changed. Mrs Rochdale was gone; she left before her son returned from Scotland, and did not once see him. Mrs Lemuel Rochdale, late Nancy Hine, was installed as lady of the manor.

Such a theme for gossip had not been vouchsafed our county for a hundred years. Of a surety they canvassed it over—talked it literally threadbare.

Mrs Rochdale escaped it fortunately. She went abroad with Sir John and Miss Childe. All the popular voice was with her and against her son. They said he had killed that pretty gentle creature—who, however, did not die, but lived to suffer—perhaps better still, to

overcome suffering; that he had broken his noble mother's heart. Few of his old friends visited him; not one of their wives visited his wife. He had done that which many "respectable" people are more shocked at than any species of profligacy—he had made a low marriage.

Society was harder upon him, harder than he deserved. At least they despised him and his marriage for the wrong cause. Not because his wife was, when he chose her, a woman thoroughly beneath him in education, tastes, and feelings,—because from this inferiority it was impossible he could have felt for her any save the lowest and most degrading kind of love,—but simply because she was a village girl—a baker's daughter!

Sir John Childe said to Lemuel's mother, in a lofty compassion, the only time he was ever known to refer to the humiliating and miserable occurrence, "Madam, whatever herself might have been, the disgrace would have been lightened had your son not married a person of such low origin. Shocking!—a baker's daughter."

“Sir John,” said Mrs Rochdale with dignity, “if my son had chosen a woman suitable and worthy of being his wife, I would not have minded had she been the daughter of the meanest labourer in the land.”

CHAPTER V.

MISS Martha !” called out our rector’s wife to me one day, “is it true, that talk I hear of Mrs Rochdale’s coming home?”

“Quite true, I believe.”

“And where will she come to? Not to the manor-house?”

“Certainly not.” I fear there was a bitterness in my tone, for the good old lady looked at me reprovingly.

“My dear, the right thing for us in this world is to make the very best of that which, having happened, was consequently ordained by Providence to happen. And we often find the worst things not so bad, after all. I was truly glad to-day to hear that Mrs Rochdale was coming home.”

“But not home to *them*,—not to the manor-house. She will take a house in the

village. She will never meet them, any more than when she was abroad."

"But she will hear of them. That does great good sometimes."

"When there is any good to be heard."

"I have told you, Martha, and I hope you have told Mrs Rochdale, that there *is* good. When first I called on Mrs Lemuel, it was simply in my character as the clergyman's wife, doing what I believed my duty. I found that duty easier than I expected."

"Because she remembered her position"—("Her former position, my dear," corrected Mrs Wood)—"because she showed off no airs and graces, but was quiet, humble, and thankful, as became her, for the kindness you thus showed."

"Because of that, and something more. Because the more I have seen of her the more I feel, that though not exactly to be liked, she is to be respected. She has sustained tolerably well a most difficult part,—that of an ignorant person suddenly raised to wealth; envied and abused by her former class, utterly scouted and despised by her present one. She has had to learn to comport herself as

mistress where she was once an equal, and as an equal where she used to be an inferior. I can hardly imagine a greater trial, as regards social position."

"Position? She has none. No ladies except yourself will visit her. Why should they?"

"My dear, why should they not? A woman who since her marriage has conducted herself with perfect propriety, befitting the sphere to which she was raised; has lived retired, and forced herself into no one's notice; who is, whatever be her shortcomings in education and refinement of character, a good wife, a kind mistress—"

"How do you know that?"

"Simply because her husband is rarely absent a day from home; because all her servants have remained with her, and spoken well of her, these five years."

I could not deny these facts. They were known to the whole neighbourhood. The proudest of our gentry were not wicked enough to shut their eyes to them, even when they contemptuously stared at Mrs Lemuel Rochdale driving drearily about in long summer after-

noons in her lonely carriage, with not a single female friend to pay a morning visit to, or suffer the like infliction from;—not even at church, when quizzing her large figure and heavy gait,—for she had not become more sylph-like with added years,—they said she was growing “crumbie,” like her father’s loaves, and wondered she would persist in wearing the finest bonnets of all the congregation.

Nay, even I, bitter as I was, really pitied her, one sacrament-day, when she unwittingly advanced to the first “rail” of communicants; upon which all the other “respectable” Christians hung back till the second. After that the Rochdales were not seen again at the communion. Who could marvel?

It was noticed, by some to his credit, by others as a point for ridicule, that her husband always treated her abroad and at home with respect and consideration. Several times a few hunting neighbours, lunching at the manor-house, brought word how Mrs Lemuel Rochdale had taken the mistress’s place at table, in a grave taciturn way, so that perforce every one had to forget entirely that he had ever

joked and laughed over her father's counter with the *ci-devant* Nancy Hine.

For that honest old father, he had soon ceased to give any trouble to his aristocratic son-in-law, having died quietly,—in a comfortable and honourable bedroom at the manor-house too,—and been buried underneath an equally comfortable and honourable headstone to the memory of “Mr Daniel Hine;” “baker” was omitted, to the great indignation of our village, who thought that if a tradesman could “carry nothing” else, he ought at least to carry the stigma of his trade out with him into the next world.

Mrs Rochdale came home,—to the only house in the neighbourhood which could be found suitable. It was a little distance from the village, and three miles from the manor-house. Many, I believe, wished her to settle in some other part of the country; but she briefly said that she “preferred” living here.

Her jointure, and an additional allowance from the estate, which was fully and regularly paid by my father,—still Mr Rochdale's steward,—was, I believe, the only link of association between her and her former home.

Nor did she apparently seek for more. The only possible or probable chance of her meeting the inhabitants of the manor-house was at Thorpe church; and she attended a chapel-of-ease in the next parish, which was, as she said, "nearer." She fell into her old habits of charity,—her old simple life; and though her means were much reduced, every one, far and near, vied in showing her attention and respect.

But Mrs Rochdale did not look happy. She had grown much older,—was decidedly "an elderly lady" now. Instead of her fair calm aspect, was a certain unquiet air, a perpetual looking and longing for something she did not find. For weeks after she came to her new house she would start at strange knocks, and gaze eagerly after strange horsemen passing the window, as if she thought, "he *may* come to see his mother." But he did not; and after a time she settled down into the patient dignity of hopeless pain.

Many people said, because Lemuel's name was never heard on her lips, that she cherished an implacable resentment towards him. That, I thought, was not true. She might have

found it hard to forgive him,—most mothers would; but did any mother ever find any pardon impossible?

She had still his boyish portrait hanging beside his father's in her bedroom; and once, opening by chance a drawer usually kept locked, I found it contained—what? Lemuel's childish muslin frocks, his boyish cloth cap, his fishing-rod, and an old book of flies.

After that, who could believe his mother “implacable”?

Yet she certainly was a great deal harder than she used to be; harsher and quicker in her judgments; more unforgiving of little faults in those about her. With regard to her son, her mind was absolutely impenetrable. She seemed to have fortified and intrenched herself behind a strong endurance; it would take a heavy stroke to reach the citadel—the poor desolate citadel of the forlorn mother's heart.

The stroke fell. None can doubt Who sent it, nor why it came.

Mrs Rochdale was standing at the school-house door, when my cousin's lad George, who had been to see the hunt pass, ran hastily in.

“ O mother, the squire’s thrown, and killed.”

“ Killed !” O that shriek ! May I never live to hear such another !

The tale, we soon found, was incorrect : Mr Rochdale had only been stunned, and seriously injured, though not mortally. But—his poor mother !

CHAPTER VI.

FOR an hour she lay on the schoolhouse-floor, quite rigid. We thought she would never wake again. When she did, and we slowly made her understand that things were not as fatal as she feared, she seemed hardly able to take in the consolation.

“My bonnet, Martha, my bonnet! I must go to him.” But she could not even stand.

I sent for my father. He came, bringing with him Dr Hall, who had just left Mr Rochdale.

Our doctor was a good man, whom every body trusted. At sight of him, Mrs Rochdale sat up and listened—we all listened; no attempt at cold or polite disguises now—to his account of the accident. It was a simple

fracture, curable by a few weeks of perfect quiet and care.

“Above all, my dear madam, *quiet*,”—for the doctor had seen Mrs Rochdale’s nervous fastening of her cloak, and her quick glance at the door. “I would not answer for the results of even ten minutes’ mental agitation.”

Mrs Rochdale comprehended. A spasm, sharp and keen, crossed the unhappy mother’s face. With a momentary pride she drew back.

“I assure you, Dr Hall, I had no—that is, I have already changed my intention.”

Then she leaned back, closed her eyes and her quivering mouth—fast—fast!—folded quietly her useless hands; and seemed as if trying to commit her son, patiently and unrepining, into the care of the only Healer,—He “who woundeth, and His hands make whole.”

At last she asked suddenly, “Who is with him?”

“His wife,” said Dr Hall, without hesitation.

“She is a good and tender nurse ; and he is fond of her.”

Mrs Rochdale was silent.

Shortly afterwards she went home in Dr Hall's carriage ; and by her own wish I left her there alone.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER that dreadful day, every night and morning for five days I went up to the manor-house, and back again to Mrs Rochdale's cottage, bringing tidings, and hearing the further report, never missed, which came to her through Dr Hall. It was almost always favourable; yet the agony of that "almost" seemed to stretch the mother's powers of endurance to their utmost limit—at times her face, in its stolid fixed quietness, had an expression half-insane.

Late in the afternoon of the sixth day—it was a rainy December Sunday, and scarcely any one thought of stirring out but me—I was just considering whether it was not time to go to Mrs Rochdale's, when some person, hooded and cloaked, came up the path to our door. It was herself.

“Martha, I want you. No thank you: I will not come in.”

Yet she leaned a minute against the dripping veranda, pale and breathless.

“Are you afraid of taking a walk with me in this rain—a long walk? No? Then put on your shawl and come.”

Though this was all she said, and I made no attempt to question her further, still I knew as well as if she had told me where she was going. We went through miry lanes, and soaking woods, where the partridges started up—whirring; across sunk fences, and under gloomy fir-plantations, till at last we came out opposite the manor-house. It looked just the same as in old times, save that there were no peacocks on the terrace, and the swans now never came near the house—no one fed or noticed them.

“Martha, do you see that light in my window? O my poor boy!”

She gasped, struggled for breath, leaned on my arm a minute, and then went steadily up, and rang the hall-bell.

“I believe there is a new servant; he may

not know you, Mrs Rochdale." I said, to prepare her.

But she needed no preparation. She asked in the quietest way—as if paying an ordinary call—for "Mrs Lemuel Rochdale."

"Mistress is gone to lie down, ma'am. Master was worse, and she was up all night with him. But he is better again to day, thank the Lord!"

The man seemed really affected, as though both "master" and "mistress" were served with truer than lip-service.

"I will wait to see Mrs Lemuel," said Mrs Rochdale, walking right into the library.

The man followed, asking respectfully what name he should say.

"Merely a lady."

We waited about a quarter of an hour. Then Mrs Lemuel appeared—somewhat fluttered, looking, in spite of her handsome dress, a great deal shyer and more modest than the girl Nancy Hine.

"I beg pardon, ma'am, for keeping you waiting; I was with my husband. Perhaps you're a stranger, and don't know how ill he has been. I beg your pardon."

Mrs Rochdale put back her veil, and Mrs Lemuel seemed as if, in common phrase, she could have dropped through the floor."

"I daresay you are surprised to see me here," the elder lady began; "still, you will well imagine, a mother—" She broke down; It was some moments before she could command herself to say, in broken accents, "I want to see—my son."

"That you shall, with pleasure, Mrs Rochdale," said Nancy earnestly. "I thought once of sending for you; but—"

The other made some gesture to indicate that she was not equal to conversation, and hastily moved up-stairs — Nancy following. At the chamber-door, however, Nancy interrupted her—

"Stop one minute, please. He has been so very ill; do let me tell him first, just to prepare—"

"He is my son—my own son. You need not be afraid," said Mrs Rochdale, in tones of which I know not whether bitterness or keen anguish was uppermost. She pushed by the wife, and went in.

We heard a faint cry, "O mother, my

dear mother!" and a loud sob—that was all.

Mrs Lemuel shut the door, and sat down on the floor outside, in tears. I forgot she had been Nancy Hine, and wept with her.

It was a long time before Mrs Rochdale came out of her son's room. No one interrupted them, not even the wife. Mrs Lemuel kept restlessly moving about the house,—sometimes sitting down to talk familiarly with me, then recollecting herself and resuming her dignity. She was much improved. Her manners and her mode of speaking had become more refined. It was evident, too, that her mind had been a good deal cultivated, and that report had not lied when it avouched sarcastically, that the squire had left off educating his dogs, and taken to educating his wife. If so, she certainly did her master credit. But Nancy Hine was always considered a "bright" girl.

Awkward she was still—large and *gauche* and underbred—wanting in that simple self-possession which needs no advantages of dress

or formality of manner to confirm the obvious fact of innate "ladyhood." But there was nothing coarse or repulsive about her—nothing that would strike one as springing from that internal and ineradicable "vulgarity," which, being in the nature as much as in the bringing-up, no education or external refinement of manner can ever wholly conceal.

I have seen more than one "lady" of undeniable birth and rearing, who was a great deal more "vulgar" than Mrs Lemuel Rochdale.

We were sitting by the dining-room fire. Servants came, doing the day's mechanical service, and brought in the tray.

Mrs Lemuel began to fidget about.

"Do you think, Miss Martha, she will stay and take some supper? Would she like to remain the night here? Ought I not to order a room to be got ready?"

But I could not answer for any of Mrs Rochdale's movements.

In process of time she came down, looking calm and happy—O, inconceivably happy!—scarcely happier, I doubt, even when, twenty-seven years ago, she had received her new-born son into her bosom—her son, now born again

to her in reconciliation and love. She even said, with a gentle smile, to her son's wife :

“ I think he wants you. Suppose you were to go up stairs ? ”

Nancy fled like lightning.

“ He says,” murmured Mrs Rochdale, looking at the fire, “ that she has been a good wife to him.”

“ She is much improved in many ways.”

“ Most likely. My son's wife could not fail of that,” returned Mrs Rochdale, with a certain air that forbade all further criticism on Nancy. She evidently was to be viewed entirely as “ my son's wife.”

Mrs Lemuel returned. She looked as if she had been crying. Her manner towards her mother-in-law was a mixture of gratitude and pleasure.

“ My husband says, since you will not stay the night, he hopes you will take supper here, and return in the carriage.”

“ Thank you ; certainly,” And Mrs Rochdale sat down—unwittingly, perhaps,—in her own familiar chair, by the bright hearth. Several times she sighed ; but the happy look never altered. And now, wholly and for ever,

passed away that sorrowful look of seeking for something never found. It was found.

I think a mother, entirely and eternally sure of her son's perfect reverence and love, need not be jealous of any other love, not even for a wife. There is, in every good man's heart, a sublime strength and purity of attachment, which he never does feel, never can feel, for any woman on earth except his mother.

Supper was served; Mrs Lemuel half-advanced to her usual place, then drew back, with a deprecating glance.

But Mrs Rochdale quietly seated herself in the guest's seat at the side, leaving her son's wife to take the position of mistress and hostess at the head of the board.

Perhaps it was I only who felt a choking pang of regret and humiliation at seeing my dear, my, noble Mrs Rochdale sitting at the same table with Nancy Hine.

After that Sunday, the mother went every day to see her son. This event was the talk of the whole village: some worthy souls were glad; but I think the generality were rather shocked at the reconciliation. They "always thought Mrs Rochdale had more spirit;"

“wondered she could have let herself down.”
“But of course it was only on account of his illness. She might choose to be ‘on terms’ with her son, but it was quite impossible she could ever take up with Nancy Hine.”

In that last sentiment I agreed. But then the gossips did not know that there was a great and a daily-increasing difference between Mrs Lemuel Rochdale and “Nancy Hine.”

I have stated my creed, as it was Mrs Rochdale’s, that lowness of birth does not necessarily constitute a low marriage. Also, that popular opinion was rather unjust to the baker’s daughter. Doubtless she was a clever ambitious girl, anxious to raise herself, and glad enough to do so by marrying the squire. But I believe she was a virtuous and not unscrupulous girl, and I firmly believe she loved him. Once married, she tried to raise herself so as to be worthy of her station; to keep and deserve her husband’s affection. That which would have made a woman of meaner nature insufferably proud, only made Nancy humble. Not that she abated one jot of her self-respect—for she was a high-spirited creature—but she had sense enough to see that

the truest self-respect lies, not in exacting honour which is undeserved, but in striving to attain that worth which receives honour and observance as its rightful due.

From this quality in her probably grew the undoubted fact of her great influence over her husband. Also because, to tell the truth—(I would not for worlds Mrs Rochdale should read this page)—Nancy was of a stronger nature than he. Mild tempered, lazy, and kind, it was easier to him to be ruled than to rule, provided he knew nothing about it. This was why the gentle Celandine could not retain the love which Daniel Hine's energetic daughter won and was never likely to lose.

Mrs Rochdale said to me, when for some weeks she had observed narrowly the ways of her son's household, "I think he is not unhappy. It might have been worse."

Thenceforward the gentry around Thorpe were "shocked" and "really quite amazed" every week of their lives. First, that poor Mr Rochdale, looking very ill, but thoroughly content, was seen driving out with his mother by his side, and his wife, in her most objectionable and tasteless bonnet, sitting

opposite. Secondly, that the two ladies, elder and younger, were several times seen driving out together,—only they two, alone! The village could scarcely believe this, even on the evidence of its own eyes. Thirdly, that on Christmas-day Mrs Rochdale was observed in her old place in the manor-house pew; and when her son and his wife came in, she actually smiled!

After that everybody gave up the relenting mother-in-law as a lost woman!

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE months slipped away. It was the season when most of our county families were in town. When they gradually returned, the astounding truth was revealed concerning Mrs Rochdale and her son. Some were greatly scandalised, some pitied the weakness of mothers, but thought that as she was now growing old, forgiveness was excusable.

“But of course she can never expect us to visit Mrs Lemuel?”

“I am afraid not,” was the rector’s wife’s mild remark. “Mrs Rochdale is unlike most ladies; she is not only a gentlewoman, but a Christian.”

Yet it was observable that the tide of feeling against the squire’s “low” wife ebbed day by day. First, some kindly stranger

noticed publicly that she was "extremely good-looking ;" to confirm which, by some lucky chance, poor Nancy grew much thinner, probably with the daily walks to and from Mrs Rochdale's residence. Wild reports flew abroad that the squire's mother, without doubt one of the most accomplished and well-read women of her generation, was actually engaged in "improving the mind" of her daughter-in-law !

That some strong influence was at work became evident in the daily change creeping over Mrs Lemuel. Her manners grew quieter, gentler ; her voice took a softer tone ; even her attire, down, or rather up, to the much-abused bonnets, was subdued to colours suitable for her large and showy person. One day a second stranger actually asked "who was that *distingué*-looking woman ?" and was coughed down. But the effect of the comment remained.

Gradually the point at issue slightly changed ; and the question became :

"I wonder whether Mrs Rochdale expects us to visit Mrs Lemuel ?"

But for Mrs Rochdale, though of course

she knew all about it,—for every body knew every thing in our village,—never vouchsafed the slightest hint one way or the other as to her expectations.

Nevertheless the difficulty increased daily, especially as the squire's mother had been long the object of universal respect and attention from her neighbours. The question, "To visit or not to visit?" was mooted and canvassed far and wide. Mrs Rochdale's example was strong; yet the "county people" had the prejudices of their class, and most of them had warmly regarded poor Celandine Childe.

I have hitherto not said a word of Miss Childe. She was still abroad. But though Mrs Rochdale rarely alluded to her, I often noticed how her eyes would brighten at sight of letters in the delicate handwriting I knew so well. The strong attachment between these two nothing had power to break.

One day she sat poring long over one of Celandine's letters, and many times took off her glasses,—alas! as I said, Mrs Rochdale

was an old lady now,—to wipe the dews from them. At length she called in a clear voice, “Martha!” and I found her standing by the mirror smiling.

“Martha, I am going to a wedding!”

“Indeed! Whose, madam?”

“Miss Childe’s. She is to be married next week.”

“To whom?” I cried, in unfeigned astonishment.

“Do you remember Mr Sinclair?”

I did. He was the rector of Ashen Dale. One of the many suitors whom, years ago, popular report had given to Miss Childe.

“Was that really the case, Mrs Rochdale?”

“Yes. Afterwards he became, and has been ever since, her truest, tenderest, most faithful *friend*. Now—”

Mrs Rochdale sat down, still smiling, but sighing also. I, too, felt a certain pang, for which I blamed myself the moment after, to think that love can ever die and be buried. Yet surely the Maker of the human heart knows it best. One thing I know, and perhaps it would account for a great deal,

that the Lemuel of Celandine's love was not, never had been, the real Lemuel Rochdale. Still—

Something in my looks betrayed me; for Mrs Rochdale, turning round, said decisively:

“Martha, I am very glad of this marriage, deeply and entirely glad, She will be happy, —my poor Celandine!”

And happy she always has been, I believe.

After Mrs Rochdale's return from the wedding, she one day sent for me.

“Martha,”—and an amused smile about her mouth reminded me of our lady of the manor in her young days,—“I am going to astonish the village. I intend giving a dinner-party. Will you write the invitations?”

They were, without exception, to the “best” families of our neighbourhood. Literally *the best*—the worthiest; people, like Mrs Rochdale herself, to whom “position” was a mere clothing, used or not used, never concealing or meant to conceal the honest form beneath, the common humanity that we all owe alike to father Adam and mother Eve. People who had no need to stickle for the rank

that was their birthright, the honour that was their due; whose blood was so thoroughly "gentle," that it inclined them to gentle manners and gentle deeds. Of such—and there are not a few throughout our English land—of such are the true aristocracy.

All Thorpe was on the *qui vive* respecting this wonderful dinner-party, for hitherto—gossip said because she could of course have no gentleman at the head of her table—Mrs Rochdale had abstained from anything of the kind. Now, would her son really take his rightful place at the entertainment? and if so, what was to be done with his wife? Could our "best" families, much as they esteemed Mrs Rochdale, ever under any possible circumstances be expected to meet the former Nancy Hine?

I need not say how the whole question served for a week's wonder; and how every body knew every other body's thoughts and intentions a great deal better than "other bodies" themselves. Half the village was out at the door or window, when on this memorable afternoon the several carriages were seen driving up to Mrs Rochdale's house.

Within, we are quiet enough. She had few preparations,—she always lived in simple elegance. Even on this grand occasion she only gave what cheer her means could afford—nothing more. Show was needless, for every guest was not a mere acquaintance, but a friend.

Dressed richly, and with special care,—how well I remembered, that is, if I had dared to remember, another similar toilette!—Mrs Rochdale sat in her chamber. Not until the visitors were all assembled did she descend to the drawing-room.

Entering there—she did not enter alone; on her arm was a lady, of about thirty; large and handsome in figure; plainly, but most becomingly attired;—a lady, to whose manners or appearance none could have taken the slightest exception, and on whom any stranger's most likely comment would have been—"What a fine-looking woman! but so quiet."

This lady Mrs Rochdale at once presented to the guests, with a simple, unimpressive quietness, which was the most impressive effect she could have made,—

“My daughter, Mrs Lemuel Rochdale.”

In a week, “every body” visited at the manor-house.

* * * * *

Perhaps I ought to end this history by describing the elder and younger Mrs Rochdale as henceforward united in the closest sympathy and tenderest affection. It was not so: it would have been unnatural, nay, impossible. The difference of education, habits, character, was too great ever to be wholly removed. But the mother and daughter-in-law maintain a sociable intercourse, even a certain amount of kindly regard, based on one safe point of union, where the strongest attachment of both converges and mingles. Perhaps, as those blest with a superabundance of faithful love often end by deserving it, Mr Rochdale may grow worthy, not only of his wife, but of his mother, in time.

Mrs Rochdale is quite an old lady now. You rarely meet her beyond the lane where her small house stands; which she occupies still, and obstinately refuses to leave. But meeting her, you could not help turning back for another glance at her slow, stately

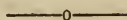
walk, and her ineffably beautiful smile. A smile which, to a certainty, would rest on the gentleman upon whose arm she always leans, and whose horse is ^{to} seen daily at her gate, with a persistency equal to that of a young man going a-courting. For people say in our village that the squire, with all his known affection for his good wife, is as attentive as any lover to his beloved old mother, who has been such a devoted mother to him.

One want exists at the manor-house,—there are no children. For some things this is as well; and yet I know not. However, so it is; and since it is, it must be right to be. When this generation dies out, probably the next will altogether have forgotten the fact, that the last Mr Rochdale made what society ignominiously terms “a low marriage.”

THE END.

THE DOUBLE HOUSE.

THE DOUBLE HOUSE.



“ JAMES, the house is let.”

“ Which ? ” said Mr Rivers, never looking up from his dinner—for a dozen patients, scattered over a dozen square miles, were awaiting him.

“ The house—the Double House. The one that everybody thought would never get a tenant. But it has got one.”

“ Who ? ”

“ A Dr Merchiston, a physician ; but luckily for us, he does not practise. He is a man of large fortune.”

“ Married ?—children ? ”

“ I really don't know. But I should rather think not. Most family men would object to that very inconvenient house. It might suit an eccentric bachelor, who could live alone in

the one-half, and shut up his domestics in the other, locking the door of communication between. But for a mistress and mother of a family—dear me!—one might as well live in two separate houses. One never could hear the children cry of nights; and the maids might idle as much as they liked without——”

Here I turned round, finding I was talking to the air. My husband had disappeared. It was in vain to attempt to interest *him* about the Double House, or the people that were coming there.

But as to the rest of our village—speculation ran wild concerning the new-comers. First, because a grave, dignified, middle-aged gentleman like Dr Merchiston—of such composed and quiet manners, too—had chosen to live in this eccentric and uncomfortable mansion. (For, as before stated, it went by the name of the Double House, and consisted of two houses joined together by a covered passage and door of communication, each having its separate entrance, and being, in fact, a complete dwelling.) Secondly, because, when the furniture was sent in, it was discovered to be the appointments of two distinct habitations;

namely, two drawing-rooms, two dining-rooms, two kitchens, and so on. The wonder grew—when Dr Merchiston, accompanied by an elderly person, “Mrs Merchiston’s maid” (there was a Mrs Merchiston, then!) inducted into the establishment two distinct sets of domestics; two cooks, two housemaids, &c.

And now everybody waited for the master and mistress, who, we learnt, had to make a long journey from London by post—for all this happened when I was a young married woman, more than forty years ago. I had my hands empty then—possibly, my head too, for I remember loitering about the whole day, and sitting lazily at parlour windows, just to catch the first sight of my new neighbours. Nay, I will confess that when the chaise and four thundered past our house, I peeped from under the blind.

In the carriage I saw only the elderly female servant, and a figure leaning back. Dr Merchiston was certainly not there.

Half-an-hour afterwards he galloped past in the twilight to his own door, which closed upon him as quickly as it had, a short time before, closed upon the others.

“ Well, they are come,” said I to James that evening.

“ Who ?” he ejaculated most provokingly.

“ The Merchistons” of course. And nobody is a bit the wiser.”

My husband put on his quaintest smile (a merry man, children, was your grandfather)—“ Never mind—there’s Sunday coming.”

My hopes revived ; I led a dull life in James’ long absences, and had been really anxious for a neighbour—a pleasant neighbour—a true gentlewoman. Yes, of course we should see the Merchistons at church on Sunday, for a large pew had been taken, cushioned and hassocked to perfection ; besides, the Doctor looked like a respectable church-going gentleman.

And sure enough, when service began, above the high pew, distinct to the eye of the whole congregation, rose his tall head and shoulders.

He was in the prime of life, though his hair was already, as we say of a September tree, “ turning.” He had a large well-shaped head, very broad across the crown, just where my grandson tells me lies the bump of

conscientiousness; but we never thought of such folly as phrenology in my days. For the face—I do not clearly remember the features, but I know the general impression conveyed was that of a strong will, capable of any amount of self-control or self-denial. The eyes, though honest and clear, had at times much restlessness in them; when steady and fixed, they were, I think, the saddest eyes I ever saw. His countenance was sickly and pale, though he flushed up once or twice on meeting the universal stare; which stare increased tenfold when he actually repeated audibly and devoutly the responses, which the Rubric enjoins on the congregation, and the congregation usually delegates to the charity-boys and the clerk.

Except this we could find nothing extraordinary in Dr Merchiston's appearance or behaviour. He sat in his pew, alone: he went out as he had entered, silently, quietly, and alone. In another pew sat two of the house-servants, and Mrs Merchiston's maid. The lady herself did not come to church at all that day.

It was rather disappointing — since, by Apedale etiquette, no one could call on Mrs Merchiston until she had appeared at church. But we heard during the week that the Rector had called on Dr Merchiston.

I tried to persuade Mr Rivers to do the same—it would be only kind and neighbourly. After half-an-hour's coaxing, which apparently was all thrown away, he briefly observed—

“Peggy, I've been.”

“Oh! do tell me all about it, from the very beginning. Which door did you knock at? The one with a brass plate, and ‘Dr Merchiston’ on it?”

“Yes.”

“And you saw him? You were shown up to the drawing-room—or the library? Which?”

“Library.”

“Was he alone? Was he polite and pleasant? Did you see his wife?”

Two nods and a shake of the head were all the answer I received to these three questions.

"Dear me! How odd! I hope you inquired after her? How did her husband say she was?"

"Quite well."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Well—you are the most provoking man to get anything out of."

"And you, my Peggy, are one of those excellent women who will never cease trying hard to get out of a man things which he absolutely does not know."

I laughed; for what was the use of quarrelling? Besides, didn't I know all James' little peculiarities before I married him?

"Just one question more, James. Have they any children?"

"Didn't ask."

So the whole Merchiston affair stood precisely where it was—until the next Sunday. Then, in the afternoon, as I walked to church, I saw a lady come quietly out of the Double House, at the left-hand door—not the one with the brass name-plate—

close it after her, and proceed alone across the road and down Church-alley.

She paused a moment in the church-yard walk, which was very beautiful in the May afternoon, with the two great trees meeting overhead, and throwing chequers of light and shade on the path leading to the porch. She looked around as if she admired and enjoyed this scene, with its picturesque groups of twos and threes,—fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, lingering about and talking till the chime of bells should cease. She looked apparently with a kindly interest on them all, and then, as if suddenly conscious that they looked back inquisitively at her, dropped her veil and hurriedly entered the church.

I heard her asking the sexton in a low voice, which seemed to belong to a woman still young, “which was Dr Merchiston’s pew?”

She was shown in, and then—being small of stature—she entirely vanished from my gaze, and that of the congregation.

Could it be that this was Mrs Merchiston?

I do not exaggerate when I say that I had six successive "droppers-in" on the Monday morning—to my great inconvenience, for I was making my cowslip-wine—I should say my first attempt at this potent liquor—and that the sole subject of conversation was Mrs Merchiston.

"What a tiny woman!" "How plainly dressed! why, her pelisse was quite old-fashioned." "Yet somebody said she was young." "He does not seem above forty, either." "How strange that he should let her go to church alone—the first time of her appearance, too!"

Such were the comments, blended with a small quantum of lately-elicited facts, which reached me concerning my new neighbours. "Very odd people—exceedingly queer—ought to be inquired into," was the general conclusion. All the village began to discuss the Double House, the duplicate establishment, and the notable facts that, since their arrival, Dr Merchiston had been seen out every day, Mrs Merchiston never; that Dr Merchiston had come to church, Mrs Merchiston staying at home, and *vice versa*.

The result was, the Apedale ladies cautiously resolved to defer "visiting" the strangers a little longer, till assured of their respectability; and I being myself a new comer, hating gossip, scandal, and censoriousness, with the virulence of warm-hearted, all-credulous youth, inly determined to call the next day.

But first, of course, I asked my husband's leave; and gaining it, hazarded a question or two further, since James, from his profession and long standing in the county, knew everybody and everything.

"Who is he, Peg? I know no more than that he is Evan Merchiston, M.D., of the University of Glasgow."

"And Mrs Merchiston?"

"Was Barbara, only child of Thomas and Barbara Currie, late of Apedale in this county, who were drowned at sea in seventeen hundred and——"

"Stop, stop! you are like an animated tombstone reading itself aloud. The very stone—I have seen it in our own church-yard. And so she was born at Apedale? That accounts for their coming to settle here.

“Precisely. Anything more, Peg?”

“No, James;” for I was ashamed of my own doubts, as if that soft, mild face I caught a glimpse of under the veil, and the manly, benevolent head which I had watched the previous Sunday, did not prove, despite all gossip, that the Merchistons were “respectable,”—even in *my* sense of the word, which was wider than that of my neighbours. “A respectable man”—as James once said when he was courting me,—“a respectable man is one who is always worthy of respect, because he always respects both himself and other people.”

Perhaps it was to prove my own “respectability” in this sense,—and justly I might respect myself—namely, the happy woman who was James Rivers’ wife,—that I dressed myself in my very best muslin gown of my own working, and my pretty green silk spencer and hat that my mother gave me when I was married, preparatory to calling on Mrs Merchiston.

At the Double House arose a puzzle. There were two front doors, and which should I knock at? After some doubt, I

thought I could not do better than follow in my husband's steps, so I gave a summons at the door with the brass plate on it.

A man, half valet, half groom, answered.

"Is Mrs Merchiston at home?"

"I don't know, ma'am; I will inquire, if you please. Will you be so kind as to knock at the other door?"

Upon which, with some abruptness, he shut this one, and left me outside.

"Well," thought I, "what can it signify which door I go in at? though 'tis rather odd, too."

However, I did as I was bidden, and was shown by a neat maid-servant into a very handsome parlour—drawing-room you would call it now, but drawing-rooms had not then reached Apedale.

By the appearance of a recently vacated sitting-room you can make a very good guess at its occupant. I soon decided that Mrs Merchiston was young, inclined to elegant tastes, especially music, that she had no children, was left a good deal alone, and probably found herself in that dreariest position for an active mind—that of a lady with nothing to do.

After a considerably long interval she appeared. Her welcome was courteous, even friendly, though not without a slight nervousness and hesitation.

It certainly had not been her toilette that kept me waiting, for she was in the simplest possible morning-gown of nankeen, and her hair would not have taken a minute's dressing, as it curled all round her head in natural, wavy curls like a child's. Very childlike, too, were both the figure and face; I could hardly believe that she must be, from the date of her parents' death on the tombstone, nearly, if not quite, thirty years old. She was not exactly pretty, but the expression of her blue eyes was very beautiful, perfectly simple, trusting, guileless, and gay; she was, in short, just the sort of woman that I should have expected a grave man like Dr Merchiston to choose out from the world of much cleverer and lovelier women, and love deeply, perhaps even madly, to the end of his days.

I was quite satisfied, nay, charmed with her. When we parted, after a much longer

chat than etiquette required, I invited her warmly to our house.

"I shall be happy to come in a friendly way, but I believe Dr Merchison does not wish for much visiting."

This was the first time the Doctor's name had entered into our conversation, so I politely inquired after his health, stating that I had seen him in church, and hoping I should soon have the pleasure of an introduction to him. I expected she would take the hint, send for her husband, and perform the desired introduction now.

But Mrs Merchiston did nothing of the kind; she merely answered my inquiries as briefly as civility allowed, and evaded the subject.

Curiosity was too strong; I could not let it go.

"I hope sincerely that it is not on account of illness that Dr Merchison abstains from visiting. My husband thought he looked in rather weak health."

"Does he look so? In weak health? Oh no—oh no!"

All the wife was indicated in that start—that flush—that paleness. Yet she had answered indifferently when I inquired after him; and in her conversation and the surroundings of this room there was no more trace of Dr Merchiston than if he never entered there, or indeed no longer existed. Likewise in her form of speech I had noticed not the habitual happy “we” which most married people learn to use, but the sad, involuntarily selfish “I” of spinsters and childless widows. It was incomprehensible.

I hastened to atone for my inadvertence. “Indeed, my dear Mrs Merchiston, you need not be alarmed. It must be only his natural paleness, which strikes a stranger; while you who see him every day——”

“Oh, that is it—that is it,” she hurriedly answered, and took me to the window to show me her flowers. Very soon after, I departed.

Some weeks passed; she returned my visit, and of course I paid a second. Several of our village wives and mothers called likewise. It was always the same story: they had been received with courtesy, were

delighted with Mrs Merchiston, but no one ever saw her husband. And when the fathers of families one after another paid their respects to the Doctor, they likewise returned well pleased, pronounced him a pleasant, good-hearted, gentlemanly fellow, but wondered that he never introduced them to his wife.

Two dinner-parties were made for the newcomers, and the invitations accepted ; but ere the first, Mrs Merchiston was "slightly indisposed ;" and at the second, Dr Merchiston was "unavoidably absent on business." So that to both dinners each came alone ; nevertheless, the impression they severally left behind was that of "exceedingly nice people."

At this time I did not go out much ; and some weeks after, your mother, children, was born. She cost me a long illness, almost my life ; but she throve well, and at last I recovered. Mrs Merchiston was among my first visitors.

I was glad to see her, for she had been very kind. Many a basket of fruit and flowers had come from the Double House

to ours. I thanked her as warmly as I felt.

“And your husband too—I do believe he has shot half the partridges in the county for my benefit—I have had so many; besides, it was he who rode twelve miles to fetch James that night they thought me dying.”

“Was it?”

“Did you not know? Then do tell him, Mrs Merchiston, how much I thank him for his goodness—for the comfort, the help he was to my poor James! Ah, *he* could understand what a husband feels when his wife is dying.”

Mrs Merchiston stooped over the new cradle with the little one asleep. She did not speak a word.

“But you will tell him,” pursued I, earnest in my gratitude. “What an excellent man he must be!”

“He is;” she answered, in a tone evidently steadied carefully down, even to coldness. “It is always a pleasure to him to do a kindness to any one.—May I look at the baby?”

She walked up and down the parlour,

lulling it on her arms. It nestled its wee face into her bosom.

"No, I am not your mother, little one. Ah, no!"

She gave the child back to me and turned away. Her eyes were full of tears.

Then taking a chair by me, and softly stroking baby's fingers, she said, "Children, I believe, are a great responsibility and a heavy care; but I think it is a sadder thing still never to have had a child. There can be no love, no happiness, like a mother's; it often atones for the loss of all other love—all other happiness."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, at times. Because motherhood must for ever take away the selfishness of grief. How could a woman feel selfish or desolate—how could she indeed know any personal grief at all, if she had a child?"

"You are speaking less as a wife would feel than a widow. And you and I, Mrs Merchiston, cannot, need not, dare not, talk as widows."

"God forbid," she said with a shiver.

I took an early opportunity of sending baby

away, and talking of every-day things. I have great pity for a childless wife, unless, as rarely happens in this world, her marriage is so supremely happy that the brimming cup leaves not another drop to be desired. Yet even then its sweetness is apt to cloy, or become a sort of dual egotism, which feels no love, sympathises with no sorrow, and shares no joy, that is not strictly its own. Forgetting, perhaps, that perfect wedded union is not meant for the satisfaction of the two only, but also that from their oneness of bliss, they may radiate a wide light of goodness and blessedness out upon the world.

I rather wondered, knowing from report and from my own experience what good people the Merchistons were, that they did not both try more to live this life, which would certainly have made them happier than she, at least, appeared. Yet, as I said, I pitied her. No one can see the skeleton in his neighbour's house, or the worm in his friend's heart; yet we know, as our experience of life grows wider, that both must assuredly be there.

Mrs Merchiston and I had a very pleasant chat; the baby had opened our hearts. We

were growing better than acquaintance—friends. We planned social evenings for the ensuing winter, in which, when he came in, Mr Rivers cordially joined.

“And I hope we shall see the Doctor too.—Madam,” continued he, breaking out into impressiveness, and discarding laconicism, “there isn’t a man alive I respect more than your husband.”

She coloured vividly, but merely observed “You are right,—I thank you.”

We were all standing at our door, she being just about to take leave. Suddenly she drew back within. At that moment there passed close by—so close that he must have touched his wife’s dress—Dr Merchiston.

He looked in, distinctly saw us all, and we him.

“Doctor—Doctor,” cried my husband.

In crossing the street, Dr Merchiston turned, bowed in reply, but did not stop.

“Excuse me, I had something to say to him,” cried James, and was off, without a glance at Mrs Merchiston.

But when I looked at her I was really

alarmed. Her limbs were tottering, her countenance pale as death. I helped her back into the parlour, and made her lie down; but all my efforts could scarcely keep her from fainting. At length she said feebly—

“Thank you, I am better now. It is very wrong of me. But I could not help it. Oh, Mrs Rivers,”—with a piteous, bewildered look,—“if you had been his wife, and had not seen him for two whole years!”

“Him! Is it possible you mean your husband?”

“Yes, my own husband—my dear husband; who loved me when he married me. God knows what I have done that he should not love me now!—O me! what have I been saying?”

“Never mind what you have been saying, my dear lady, I shall keep it all secret. There now, it will do you good to cry.”

And I cried too, heartily. It seemed very dreadful. That young, fond, pretty creature, to live under the same roof as her husband, and not to have seen him for two whole years. Here was explained the mystery of the double

house—here was confirmation entire of those few straggling reports which, when I caught them flying abroad, I had utterly quenched, denied, and disbelieved. I was greatly shocked, and as was natural, I took the woman's side of the question.

“And I thought him so good, and you so happy! What deceivers men are!”

“You are mistaken, Mrs Rivers, in one man at least,” she returned, with dignity; “your husband spoke truly when he said there was no man living more worthy of respect than Dr Merchiston.”

“He has not lost yours, then?”

“In no point.”

“And you love him still?”

“I do; God pity me—I do.” She sobbed as if her heart were breaking.

There was then but one conclusion to be drawn—one only reason for a good man's thus mercilessly putting away his wife,—some error on her part, either known or imagined by him. But no, when I looked down on her gentle, innocent, childlike face, I rejected the doubt as impossible. Nor had I detected in her any of

those inherent, incurable faults of temper or of character, the "continual dropping that weareth away the stone," which, if divorce be ever justifiable for any thing short of crime, would have justified it in some marriages I have seen.

"Does anybody know? Not that I mind, but it might harm him. Mrs Rivers, do you think anybody at Apedale knows?"

"Alas, in a village like this, there can be no such thing as a secret."

She wrung her hands. "I thought so—I feared so. But he came to live in the country because the doctors said London air was killing me. I wish it had killed me—oh I wish it had!"

I have seen the look of despair in many a wronged, miserable wife's eyes, but I never saw it so mournfully plain as in those of poor Barbara Merchiston. I took her to my arms, though she was older than I, and asked her to let me comfort her and be her friend, if she had no other.

"Not one—not one. But"—and she started back with a sudden fear—"you will

not be my friend by becoming an enemy to my husband?"

"I have no such intention. I condemn him not: to his own Master let him stand or fall."

Probably this was harshly spoken, for she took my hand, saying imploringly, "Pray do not misjudge either him or me. I was very wrong in betraying anything. But my life is so lonely. I am not strong; and this shock was too much for me. How ill he looked—how gray he has grown! Oh Evan, my poor husband!"

To see her weeping there, without the slightest anger or wounded pride, roused both feelings in me. I determined to fathom this mysterious affair; and, braving the usual fate of those who interfere between man and wife,—namely, being hated by both parties, —to try and remedy it if I could.

"Tell me, my dear Mrs Merchiston—believe me it is from no idle curiosity I ask, how long has this state of things lasted?"

"For five years."

"Five years!" I was staggered. "Entire separation and estrangement for five years!"

And for no cause? Are you sure—oh forgive me if I wound you,—but are you sure there is no cause?”

“I declare before Heaven—none! He has never blamed me in word or deed.”

“Nor given you reason to blame him?” said I, with a sharp glance, still strongly inclining to the rights of my own sex.

“Me—blame him?—blame my husband?” she answered, with a look of half reproachful wonder. “I told you he loved me.”

“But love changes,” continued I, very cautiously, for it was hard to meet her large innocent eyes, like a gazelle’s with your hand on its throat. “Men sometimes come to love other women than their wives.”

She flushed indignantly all over her face. “You wrong him—you wickedly wrong him. His life is, and always has been, as spotless as my own.”

Well, thought I, I give it up. Either she is extraordinarily deceived, and the hypocrisy of that man is such as never was man’s before, or the problem is quite beyond my solving. Yet—one more attempt.

“Just a word. Tell me, Mrs Merchiston,

how and when did this sad estrangement begin ?”

“Six months after our marriage. We married for love; we were both alone in the world; we were all in all to one another. Gradually he grew melancholy, I could not find out why; he said it would pass away in time. Then he had a fever—I nursed him through it. When he recovered—he—sent me away.”

The brute ! I thought. Just like a man ! “But how ?” I said aloud. “What reason did he give ? What excuse could he offer ?”

“None. He only wrote to me, when away on a short journey, and told me that this separation must be—that it was absolutely inevitable—that if I desired it he would leave me altogether—otherwise, it was his earnest wish we should still live under the same roof. But never, never meet.”

“And you never have met ?”

“Very rarely, only by the merest chance. Then he would pass me by, never lifting his eyes. Once—it was in the first few weeks of our separation—I met him on the staircase.

I was different from what I am now, Mrs Rivers; very proud, outraged, indignant. I flung past him, but he caught me in his arms. I would not speak; I stood upright in his clasp like stone. 'We have been happy, Barbara.' 'But never can be again,' I cried passionately. 'No,' he said; 'I know that;—never again.' He held me close, a moment or two, then broke from me. We have never met since."

Such was her story, which the more I dived into it, became the more incomprehensible. No condemnatory evidence could be found against the husband; in all things Mrs Merchiston's comforts were studied, her wishes gratified. She said it often seemed as if an invisible watch were kept over her, to provide against her least desire. I could only counsel the poor wife to patience, hope, and trust in God.

She left me a little comforted. I asked her would she not stay? was she not afraid of meeting him in the street?

"Oh no," she sighed, "he seems to know intuitively my goings out and my comings in. I never see him, never, not even

by chance. I cannot guess how it happened to-day. How ill he looked !” she added, recurring again to what seemed uppermost in her thoughts. “Mrs Rivers, will you entreat your husband to watch over him—to take care of him? Promise me you will.”

I promised her, poor tender thing, and inwardly determined to watch him myself with a closer eye than that of my simple-hearted husband, to whom, of course, I told the whole matter.

He, like me, was now fairly bewildered. “Peggy,” he said, “hadn’t you better let the thing alone?”

“Let it alone,” I cried, “such cruel sorrow, such a flagrant wrong—Never.”

“Well,” kissing me, “perhaps you are right, Peg, my dear. Happy folk ought to help the miserable.”

I set to work. Woman’s wit is keen, and I had my share of the quality.

We invited Dr Merchiston to our house; he came, at first rarely, then frequently. Of course Mrs Merchiston was always included in these invitations, and of course we received duly the formal apology. Gradually this

ceased, and he came still. He must have known that she came too, on other days: often he found books and work of hers lying about my table; yet his visits ceased not. He seemed to like to come, He and my husband became staunch friends, but as for me, despite his courtesy, my heart remained angry and sore against him.

Yet I must confess that we found him all his wife fondly believed; a man of keen intellect, high principle, generous and tender heart. If I had not known what I did know, I should have avouched unhesitatingly that the world did not contain a nobler man than Dr Merchiston. Excepting of course, my James.

For his manners, they were simple, natural kind; not in any way eccentric, or indicative of vice or folly. Among our neighbours his character rose to the highest pitch of estimation; and when at last the fatal truth was known (alas! what household misery can ever long be hid, especially in a country place), all sorts of excuses and apologies were made for him.

And cruelly, mournfully—as it always

falls on the weaker side—fell the lash of the world's tongue upon his wife.

But I—and one or two more who knew and loved her—stood boldly by Mrs Merchiston through fair report and foul. And I believe so great was the mingled awe and respect which the Doctor impressed upon all his acquaintance, that no portion of these calumnies against her reached her husband.

Three months slipped by without change, save that Mrs Merchiston's sad lot grew sadder still. Her few acquaintance dropped her; it was so "extremely inconvenient." One lady was on thorns whenever Mrs Merchiston called, lest Dr Merchiston should chance to call likewise; another tried every conceivable diplomacy to bring about their meeting; it would be "so very amusing." Gradually the unfortunate wife could not walk down our village without being pointed at, or crossed aside from, till she rarely went out at all.

Dr Merchiston, too, was seldom seen, except by his immediate friends, none of whom dared breathe a word to him concerning his domestic affairs, save the simple inquiries

of courtesy after Mrs Merchiston, to which he invariably answered in the customary form, as any other husband would answer. I think, in fact I know, that all this time he believed her to be living at peace; perfectly happy in her beautiful house, in our cheerful village, and in a small society of her own choosing, of which I was the chief. He once hinted as much to me, expressing his great pleasure that Mrs Merchiston and myself were fast friends.

I hardly know what possessed me that I did not then and there burst out upon him with a piece of my mind; any "woman of spirit"—as James sometimes called me—would have done it. What was he but a man?

Ay, there was the difficulty. His perfect manliness disarmed one; that quiet dignity of reserve, which, I have noticed, while women are ready enough to complain of their husbands, keeps nine men out of ten from ever saying a word against their wives. Then, too, the silent deprecation of his sickly mien, and of the ineffable, cureless melancholy which, the moment he ceased conversation, arose in his dark eyes. What could a tender-

hearted woman do? Beginning by hating and despising, I often ended in pitying him, and every time I saw him all my determinations to attack him about his domestic wickedness vanished in air.

Besides—as James astutely observed—if a wife obstinately persists in blindly obeying her husband, never asking the why and the wherefore of his insane and incomprehensible will, and concealing from him that she is wasting away in slow misery, what business has a third party to accuse or even acquaint him of the fact?

Was no other plan to be tried? Yes; accidentally one was forced into my mind.

On a winter's afternoon, when I sat with my baby over our happy Christmas fire. Mrs Merchiston came rushing in.

“Hide me—anywhere; let nobody find me. Mrs Rivers, they hoot at me down the street. They say—oh, I dare not think what they say, and I dare not tell him. Perhaps—oh, horror—perhaps he thinks so too.”

Long shudders possessed her; it was some time before she gained the slightest composure.

It was not difficult for me to guess the cause of her anguish.

“Never mind wicked tongues, Mrs Merchiston, they will cease if let alone. Only live in peace and patience. Hope in God still.”

“I can’t,” she said, with a wild look that I had not before seen. “How should I hope in Him? He has forsaken me; why should I live any longer? Oh! save me, save me! Let me go away from here, from my husband. I must go, their cruel tongues will kill me.”

“You shall,” I cried, with a sudden idea, as suddenly converted into a resolution; “you shall, and I will help you.”

Whereupon I explained all to her; somewhat hastily, for I was afraid of Mr Rivers coming home; he who had just a man’s notion of marital authority, and the wickedness of conjugal rebellion. But this was a case in which I set even him at defiance—or rather I trusted to my own influence to convince him that, acting from my conscience solely, I acted right.

Mark me, children, I would have a woman

submit to any lawful authority, even unjustly and cruelly exercised, so long as the misery does not ruin her soul. When the torment goads her thus far—when like Job's wife, the Devil tempts her to "curse God and die," then, I hold, all duty ceases, except to her Maker, and herself, the creature which He made ; let her save her own soul, and flee !

My counsel to Mrs Merchiston was this ; at once—openly if she could, secretly if that was impossible—to leave her husband, absolutely and entirely, exacting no maintenance, making neither excuse nor accusation.

It necessarily followed that she must earn her own bread ; and she must immediately seek a position that would place her fair fame above suspicion, both now and at any future time.

This is how I planned it.

I had a sister, a well-jointed widow, with a large family. I proposed to place my poor friend with her as a governess. Mrs Merchiston eagerly assented. She had been a teacher, she said, in her youth, so that the duty would be easy, and she could fulfil it well.

“And oh!” she cried, while the tears ran down her face, ‘I shall be in a household, a home, among children. Perhaps the little things will love me.’”

Poor desolate soul!

I will not detail the many evening lectures that were required to bring my husband to my own way of thinking. For one thing he inexorably held out, and finally I agreed with him, that Dr Merchiston should be openly and honourably informed of his wife’s intended departure.

She wrote to him herself, in our house. James and I both read the letter. It was as follows :—

“Dear Husband,

“Forgive my addressing you against your implied desire. Forgive my asking once more, and for the last time, what have I done to you? Why are you estranged from me? I can no longer sustain the life I lead. I desire to leave you. I am going to be a governess, as I was before we were married. Already all my plans are formed, but I could not part from you without this forewarning and farewell.

“Your wife,

“BARBARA.”

This—the last and most carefully, even coldly worded, of the many letters she wrote

and tore up—was left, to avoid remarks, by my own servant at Dr Merchiston's door.

On the evening of that day Mrs Merchiston came to my house. She looked white and shivering, but not with the cold. Her poor blue eyes so warm and kind, had a frosty glitter in them that was strange and sad.

"No answer," she kept repeating; "no answer—none. Now I *must* go."

I replied that everything was ready; our gig would be at the door in a minute; it was a bright moonlight night, and I myself would accompany her to my sister's house.

"It is not far—not so very far Mrs Rivers? Not so far but that I can always hear of him, or—if he should be ill at any time—"

"You can go home at once."

"Home!" she echoed piteously. Then, as if stung into one desperate effort, the last struggle of her tender and feeble nature, she sprang into the gig, I following her.

I was scarcely seated, reins in hand, for I was determined that no other than myself should have the credit of eloping with Mrs Merchiston, than I felt on my right arm a grasp like a vice.

"Mrs Rivers, whom have you there? Is it my wife?"

"Yes, Dr Merchiston," I cried, not in the least frightened by the look and tone; "yes, it is your wife. I am taking her where she will live in peace, and not be killed by inches any longer. Stand aside; let me drive on."

"In one moment. Pardon me;" he passed in front of the horse to the other side. "Barbara? Is that you, Barbara?"

No words could describe the ineffable tenderness, the longing anguish, of that voice. No wonder that it made her grasp my arm, and cry wildly on me to stop.

"It is not ten minutes since I received your letter. Barbara, grant me one word in the presence of this lady, by whose advice you are leaving your husband."

"By whose advice did you forsake your wife, Dr Merchiston?" I began, boldly; but by the carriage-lamp I caught sight of his face, and it seemed like that of a man literally dying—dying of despair. "Mrs Merchiston, suppose we re-enter my house for awhile. Doctor, will you lift your wife down? She has fainted."

Soon the poor lady was sitting in my parlour, I by her side. Dr Merchiston stood opposite, watching us both. He was neither violent nor reproachful, but perfectly silent. Nevertheless, I felt somewhat uncomfortable, and glad from my heart that James was safe ten miles off, and that I alone had been mixed up with this affair.

“She is better now, Mrs Rivers. I may speak?”

“Speak, sir.”

“I will pass over my present trying position. Of course, I perceive—in fact, I was already aware—that Mrs Merchiston has acquainted you with our sad, inevitable estrangement.”

“Why inevitable? When there has been no quarrel on either side? When, cruel as you have been to her, she has never breathed a word to your discredit?” (He groaned.) “When, as I understand, you have not the shadow of blame to urge against her?”

“Before heaven, none. Have I not declared this, and will I not declare it before all the world? She knows I will.”

“Then why, my dear sir, in the name of

all that is good and honourable—nay, even in the name of common sense, why is your estrangement inevitable ?”

He seemed to cower and shudder as before some inexpressible dread ; once he glanced wildly round the room, as if with the vague idea of escaping. Finally, he forced himself to speak, with a smile that was most painful to witness.

“ Mrs Rivers, even though a lady asks me, I cannot answer that question.”

“ Can you if your wife herself asks it ? I will leave you together.”

As I rose to go, Dr Merchiston interposed. The cold sweat stood on his brow ; he looked—yes, I thought so at the moment—like a possessed man struggling with his inward demon.

“ For God’s sake, no ! For the love of mercy, no ! Stay by her ; take care of her. I will speak in your presence ; I will not detain you long.”

“ You had better not. See,” for the poor wife was again insensible. Dr Merchiston rushed to her side ; he chafed her hands ; he fell on his knees before her ; but as she

opened her eyes he crept away, and put the room's length between them.

"Now may I speak? You wished to leave me, Barbara. To go whither?"

I told him, concealing nothing; he seemed greatly shocked.

"Mrs Rivers," he said at length, "such a scheme is impossible. I will never consent to it. If she desires, she shall leave my house, for yours or any other. She shall have any luxuries she pleases; she shall be as free from me as if I were dead and she a widow. But that my wife should quit the shelter of my roof to earn her daily bread—I never will allow it."

From this decision there was no appeal. The wife evidently desired none; her eyes began to shine with joy, and even I took hope.

"But, Dr Merchiston, can there be no change? You loved one another once. Love is not yet dead; love never wholly dies, Surely—"

"Madam, silence!"

Could it be his voice that spoke; his once calm, low voice? I was now really terrified.

He rose and walked about the room; we two sat trembling. At last he stopped in his old position, with his hand on the mantel-piece.

“Mrs Rivers, my extremely painful position—you will acknowledge it is such—must excuse anything in me unbecoming, uncourteous.”

I assured him he had my free pardon for any excitement, and I hoped he felt calmer now.

“Perfectly, perfectly; you must see that, do you not?”

“I do,” said I, with a sense of bitterness against the whole race of mankind, who can drive poor womankind almost out of their senses, while they themselves preserve the most sublime composure.

“I will now, with your permission and in your presence, speak to my wife. Barbara”—in a quiet equal tone, as if addressing an ordinary person—“I told you five years ago that it is not I who am inexorable, but fate, even if the life we then began to lead should last until my death. I repeat the same now, Yet, for these five years you have been at peace and safe. Safe,” he repeated, with a

slight pause, "under my roof, where I can shelter and protect you better than anywhere else."

"Protect her?" And then I told him—how could I help it?—of the slights and outrages to which their manner of life had exposed her. How every idle tongue in the neighbourhood had wagged at her expense, and to both their dishonour. It was terrible to see the effect produced on him.

"Hush; tell me no more, or—Barbara, forgive me; forgive me that I ever made you my wife. There is but one atonement; shall I make you *my widow!*"

"Doctor Merchiston," I cried, catching his arm, "are you mad?"

He started, shuddered, and in a moment had recovered all his self-control.

"Mrs Rivers, this is a state of things most terrible, of which I was totally ignorant. How is it to be remedied?—Granting, as you *must* grant, the one unalterable necessity?

I thought a minute, and then proposed, to silence the tongue of all Apedale, that the husband and wife should openly walk to church together every Sunday, and kneel together in

the house of God. And may He forgive me if in this scheme I had a deeper hope than I betrayed.

"I will do it," said Dr Merchiston, after a pause. "Barbara, do you consent? Will you come home?"

"I will."

"But to the old life? In nothing changed—for changed it cannot, must not be?"

"Under any circumstances I will come home."

"Thank you; God bless you. It is better so."

There was a quiet pause, broken only by one or two faint sobs from her. At last they ceased. Dr Merchiston took his hat to depart; as he was going, his wife started up and caught him by the hand.

"Husband, one word, and I can bear all things. Did—did you ever love me?"

"Love you? Oh, my little Barbara!"

"*Do* you love me?"

"Yes," in a whisper, sharp with intolerable pain; "yes."

"Then I do not mind anything. Oh no, thank God! I do not mind."

She burst into hysterical laughter, and threw herself into my arms. It was only my arms she could come to—her husband was gone.

She went home as she had promised, and the old life began once more. Without the slightest change, she told me—save that regularly on Sunday mornings he knocked at the door of communication between the double house, kept always locked on her side, by his desire—that she found him waiting in the hall, and they walked arm-and-arm, as silently and sadly as mourners after a corpse, to the church door. In the same way returning, he immediately parted from her, and went his way to his own apartments.

Apedale was quite satisfied, and circulated innumerable explanations, which had probably as much truth in them as the former accusations.

Dr Merchiston came as usual to play chess with my husband, and no allusion was ever made to the night which had witnessed so strange a scene in our house.

Mrs Merchiston improved in health and cheerfulness. To a woman the simple con-

viction of being loved is support and strength through the most terrible ordeal. Once sure of that, her faith is infinite, her consolation complete. After his "Yes," poor little Barbara revived like a flower in the sun.

Not so her husband. Everybody noticed that Dr Merchiston was wasting away to a shadow. On Sundays especially, his countenance, always sallow and worn, seemed to me to have the ghastly look of one whom you know to be inwardly fighting a great soul battle. You feel at once the warfare will be won—but the man will die.

And still, as ever, of all the impenetrable mysteries that life can weave, that man and his secret were the darkest.

At least to me. Whether it was so to my husband, whose reserved habits and wide experience of human nature helped to make him what, thank heaven, he always was—much wiser than I—I do not know ; but I often caught his grave penetrating eye intently fixed on Dr Merchiston. So much so, that more than once the Doctor recoiled from it uneasily. But Mr Rivers redoubled his kindness ; in truth, I never knew James, who

was very undemonstrative, and usually engrossed between interest in his patients and his domestic affections, attach himself so strongly to any male friend out of his own home, as he did to Dr Merchiston.

He seized every opportunity to allure our neighbour from his morbid, solitary in-doors life to a more wholesome existence. They rode out together on the medical rounds—James trying to interest him in the many, many opportunities of philanthropy with which a country surgeon's life abounds. Sometimes—one day I especially remember—Dr Merchiston said he thought Mr Rivers had familiarized him with every possible aspect of human pain.

“Not all—I have yet to show you—indeed, I thought of doing so this morning—the blackest aspect human suffering can show. And yet, like all suffering, a merciful God has not left it without means of alleviation.”

“What do you mean? I thought we were going to some hospital. For what disease?”

“No physical disease. Yet one which I believe, like all other diseases, is capable of prevention and cure—mental insanity.”

Dr Merchiston grew as white as this my paper. He said, in a confused manner, which vainly tried to simulate indifference,—“ You are right. But it is a painful subject,—insanity.”

I did not wonder that my husband tried to change the conversation, and his morning plan likewise. It was evident that in some way the topic strongly affected our friend. Probably he had had a relative thus afflicted.

It must be remembered that forty years ago the subject of insanity was viewed in a very different light from what it is at present. Instead of a mere disease, a mental instead of a bodily ailment—yet no less susceptible of remedy—it was looked upon as a visitation, a curse, almost a crime. Any family who owned a member thus suffering, hid the secret as if it had been absolute guilt. “Mad-house,” “mad doctor,” were words which people shuddered at, or dared not utter. And no wonder! for in many instances they revealed abysses of ignorance, cruelty, and wickedness, horrible to contemplate. Since then more than one modern Howard

has gone among those worse than prisons, cleared away incalculable evils, and made even such dark places of the earth to see a hopeful dawn.

Throughout his professional career, one of my husband's favourite "crotchets," as I called them, had been the investigation of insanity.

Commencing with the simple doctrine, startling, but true, that every man and woman is mad on some one point—that is, has a certain weak corner of the mind or brain, which requires carefully watching like any other weak portion of the body, lest it should become the seat of rampant disease, he went on with a theory of possible cure—one that would take a wiser head than mine to explain, but which effectually removed the intolerable horror, misery, and hopelessness of that great cloud over-hanging the civilised and intellectual portion of the world—mental insanity. I do not mean the raving madness which is generally super-induced by violent passions, and which by-gone ages used to regard as a sort of demoniacal possession—which it may be, for aught I know—but that general state of unsoundness,

unhealthiness of brain, which corresponds to unhealthiness of body, and like it, often requires less a physician than a sanitary commissioner.

This may seem an unnecessary didactic interpolation, but I owe it to the natural course of my story, and as a tribute to my dear husband. Besides, it formed the subject of a conversation which, the question being voluntarily revived by Dr Merchiston, he and James held together during the whole afternoon.

It was good and pleasant to hear those two men talk. I listened, pleased as a woman who is contented to appreciate and enjoy that to which herself can never attain. And once more, for the thousandth time, I noted with admiration the wonderfully strong and lucid intellect with which Dr Merchiston could grasp any subject, handle it, view it on all points, and make his auditors see it too. Even on this matter, which still seemed to touch his sympathies deeply, especially when he alluded to the world's horror and cruel treatment of insane persons—insane perhaps only on some

particular point, while the rest of the brain was clear and sound—even there his powers of reasoning and argument never failed.

“Well,” said Mr Rivers, smiling, as they shook hands at the door, “I am glad to have found some one who can understand my hobby. You are certainly one of the clearest-headed men I ever knew.”

“You truly think so? I thank you, Rivers,” said the Doctor, earnestly, as he disappeared into the dark.

I remember this night’s conversation vividly, because, in heaven’s inscrutable mercy—ay, I *will* write “mercy”—it was the last time Dr Merchiston entered our house.

The next morning he bowed to me at the window, riding past on his gaily curvetting horse, looking better and more cheerful than he had done for a long time.

That evening my husband was summoned to the Double House. Its master had been thrown from his horse, his leg and his right arm fractured. If all went well, James told me, and I had rarely seen him so moved—the patient would be confined to his bed,

bound there hand and foot, helpless as a child, for three or four months. Poor Dr Merchiston !

“Is his wife with him?” was the first question I asked.

“Yes, thank God, yes !” cried James, fairly bursting into tears. I was so shocked, so amazed by his emotion, that I never inquired or learnt to this day how it came about, or what strange scene my husband had that evening witnessed in the Double House.

There was a long crisis, in which the balance wavered between life and death. Life triumphed.

I went almost every day: but it was long before I saw Mrs Merchiston; when I did, it was the strangest sight! Her looks were full of the deepest peace, the most seraphic joy. And yet she had been for weeks a nurse in that sick room. A close, tender, indefatigable nurse, such as none but a wife can be; as fondly watchful—ay, and as gratefully and adoringly watched, my husband told me, by the sick man’s dim eyes, as if she had been a wife bound for years in near, continual household bonds, instead of having lived

totally estranged from him since the first six months of union.

But no one ever spoke or thought of that now.

Dr Merchiston slowly improved; though he was still totally helpless, and his weakness remained that of a very infant.

In this state he was when I was first admitted to his sick-chamber..

Mrs Merchiston sat at the window, sewing. The room was bright and pleasant; she had brought into it all those cheerfulnesses which can alleviate the long-to-be-endured suffering from which all danger is past. When I thought of the former aspect and atmosphere of the house, it did not seem in the least sad now; for Barbara's eyes had a permanent, mild, satisfied light; and her husband's, which were ever dwelling on her face and form, were full of the calmest, most entire happiness.

I sat with them a good while, and did not marvel at his saying ere I left—"that he thoroughly enjoyed being ill."

With what a solemn, sublime evenness is life meted out! Barbara has told me since

that those five months following her husband's accident were the most truly happy her life had ever known.

"Look at him," she whispered to me one evening when he lay by the window, half dozing, having been for the first time allowed a faint attempt at locomotion, though he was still obliged to be waited upon hand and foot—"Mrs Rivers, did you ever see so beautiful a smile? Yet it is nothing compared to that he wore when he was very, very ill, when I first began to nurse and tend him; and he did nothing but watch me about the room, and call me his Barbara.—I am here, Evan!—did you want me?"

She was at his side in a moment, smoothing his pillow, leaning over and caressing him. I think he was not aware of there being any one in the room but their two selves, for he fondled her curls and her soft cheeks.

"My Barbara, we have had a little ray of comfort in our sad life. How happy we have been in this sick room!"

"We *have been*, Evan?"

"Ay; but nothing lasts in this world—nothing!"

"Husband, that is like one of your morbid sayings when we were first married. But I will not have it now—I will not, indeed." And she closed his mouth with a pretty petulance. He lifted his hand to remove hers, then sunk back.

"I am growing strong again; I can use my right arm. O Heaven! my right arm! I am not helpless any longer."

"No, thank God! But you speak as if you were shocked and terrified."

"I am—I am. With strength comes—O my Barbara!"

His wife, alarmed at the anguish of his tone, called out my name. Dr Merchiston caught at it. "Is Mrs Rivers there? Bid her come in; bid anybody come in. Ah! yes, that is well."

After a pause, which seemed more of mental than physical exhaustion, he became himself again for the rest of the evening.

The next day he sent for me, and, in Mrs Merchiston's absence, talked with me a long while about her. He feared her health would give way; he wished her to be more with me; he hoped I would impress upon her that it made him miserable to see her spend-

ing all her days and nights in his sick room.

“What! in the only place in the world where she has real happiness?”

“Do you think so? Is she never happy but with me? Then Heaven forgive me! Heaven have pity on me!” he groaned.

“Dr Merchiston, you surely do not intend to send your wife from you again—your forgiving, loving wife?”

Before he could answer she came in. I went away thoroughly angry and miserable. That evening I indulged James with such a long harangue on the heartlessness of his sex, that, as I said, he must have been less a man than an angel to have borne it. When I told him the cause, he ceased all general arguments, sat a long time thoughtful, burning his hessians against the bars of the grate, finally sent me to bed, and did not himself follow until midnight.

Dr Merchiston's cure progressed; in the same ratio his wife's cheerfulness declined. He grew day by day more melancholy, irritable, and cold. By the time he was released from his helpless condition the icy barrier

between them had risen up again. She made no complaint, but the facts were evident.

My husband and I by his express desire spent almost every evening at the Double House. Very painful and dreary evenings they were. Convalescence seemed to the poor patient no happiness—only a terror, misery, and pain.

One night, just as we were leaving, making an attempt at cheerfulness—for it was the first time he had performed the feat of walking, and his wife had helped him across the room with triumphant joy—he said, breaking from a long reverie, “Stay! a few minutes more; Rivers—Mrs Rivers—I want to speak with you both.”

We sat down. He fell back in his chair, and covered his eyes. At length Mrs Merchiston gently took the hands away.

“Evan, you don’t feel so strong as usual to-night.”

“I do; alas, alas, I do,” he muttered. “Would I were weak, and lay on that bed again as powerless as a child. No, Barbara; look, I am strong—well.” He stood up, stretching his gaunt right arm, and clenching the hand; then

let it drop, affrighted. "My little Barbara, I must send thee away."

"Send me away?"

"Send her away?"

"Peggy," cried my husband, in stern reproof, "be silent!"

The poor wife broke out into bitter sobs. "Oh, Evan, what have I done to you? Dear Evan, let me stay—only till you are well, quite well."

For, despite what he said about his strength, his countenance, as he lay back, was almost that of a corpse. Barbara's clinging arms seemed to him worse than the gripe of a murderer.

"Take her away, Mrs Rivers; take my poor wife away. *You* know how she has nursed me; *you* know whether I love her or not."

"Love her," I cried bitterly; but James's hand was upon my shoulder. His eye, which with its gentle firmness could, they said at the hospital, control the most refractory and soothe the most wretched patient, was fixed upon Dr Merchiston. I saw the sick man yield; the bright hectic flush came and went in his cheek.

"Rivers, my good friend, what do you wish me to do?"

"A very simple thing. Tell me—not these poor, frightened women—but me, your real reason for acting thus."

"Impossible."

"Not quite. It may be I partly guess it already."

Dr Merchiston started up with the look of a hunted wild beast in its last despair, but my husband laid his hand on his, in a kind but resolute way.

"Indeed, indeed, you are safe in telling me. Will you do it?"

The patient hesitated, held up his thin hand to the light with a wan smile, then said, "It cannot matter for long; I will tell you."

James immediately sent us both out of the room.

Mrs Merchiston was a very weak woman, gentle and frail. She wept until her strength was gone; then I put her to bed in her maid's charge, and waited until Mr Rivers ended his conference with her husband.

It was two hours before James came out. At sight of him my torrent of curiosity was dried

up; he looked as I had sometimes seen him, coming home from a death-bed. To my few questions he answered not a word.

“But at least,” said I, half crying, “at least you might tell me what I am to do with poor Mrs Merchiston.”

“Yes, yes.” He thought a minute. “She must go home with us; the sooner the better.”

“You agree, then,” I burst out, breathless; “you agree to this separation?”

“Entirely.”

“You join with her wicked husband in his ingratitude—his brutality—”

“Peggy!” James caught me by the shoulders, with the sternest frown that ever fell on me in all our peaceful married life; “Peggy, may heaven forgive you! You do not know what you are saying.”

I was completely awed.

“Dr Merchiston has told you the secret, and you are determined to keep it?”

“Implicitly, while his poor life lasts.”

My husband was a man of inviolable honour. He never would tell a patient's secrets, or a friend's, even to me, his wife; nor was I the woman to desire it. I urged no more.

During the ten days that Mrs Merchiston remained in my house, part of the time she was in a sort of low fever, which was the happiest thing for her poor soul. I made not a single inquiry after her husband; I knew that Mr Rivers was with him at all hours, as doctor, nurse, and friend.

One day, when Mrs Merchiston was sitting in the parlour with me, he looked in at the door. She did not see him. He quietly beckoned me out.

“Well, James?”

“Speak lower, Peggy, lower; don’t let her hear.’

And then I saw how very much agitated he was; yet even that did not quite remove the bitterness with I could not help mentioning the name of Dr Merchiston.

“Peggy, Dr Merchiston is dying.”

I had not expected this; it was a great shock.

“I feared it would be so,” continued James; “I have seen him sinking this long time. Now the mind is at peace, but the worn-out body—”

“His wife—his poor wife,” was all I could utter.

“Yes, that is what I came to say. She must go to him; he wishes it much. Do you think she will?”

I smiled sadly. “Ah! James, she is a woman.

“And you women can forgive to all eternity,—Heaven bless you for it! Besides, she will know the whole truth soon.”

I asked not what this “truth” was. What did it matter? he was dying.

“But are you sure, James, there is no hope of his recovery?”

“None, I believe—and am almost glad to believe it. There is no man I ever knew whom I so deeply pity, and shall so thankfully see gone to his last rest, as Dr Merchiston.”

These were strong words, enough to calm down every wrong feeling, and make me fit to lead the wife to her husband’s sick—nay, death-chamber.

How we brought her thither I forget. I only remember the moment when we stood within the door.

Dr Merchiston lay on his bed, as for five long months he had patiently and cheerfully lain. He had something of that old quiet

look now, but with a change. The strange awful change which, however fond friends may deceive themselves, is always clearly visible to a colder gaze. You say at once, "That man will die."

When Barbara came into the room, he stretched out his arms with the brightest, happiest smile. She clung to him closely and long. There was no forgiveness asked or bestowed; it was not needed.

"I am so content, my Barbara, content at last!" and he laid his head on her shoulder.

"Evan, you will not part from me again?"

"No—I need not now. They will tell you why it was. You believe—you will always believe, how I loved you?"

"Yes."

"Stoop. Let me hold her close as I used to do,—my wife, my little Barbara. Stoop down."

She obeyed. He put his arms round her, and kissed her with many kisses, such as he had not given her since she was a six months' bride; their memory remained sweet on her lips till she was old and grey.

Dr Merchiston died at the next sunrise, died peacefully in Barbara's arms.

* * * *

Three days after, my husband and I stood by the coffin, where for the last few minutes on earth the features which had been so familiar to us for the last two years were exposed to our view. James said,—touching the forehead, which was placid as a dead baby's, with all the wrinkles gone,—

“Thank the Lord !”

“Why ?”

“For this blessed death, in which alone his sufferings could end. He was a monomaniac, and he knew it.”

Before speaking again, my husband reverently and tenderly closed the coffin, and led me downstairs.

The funeral over, and we two sitting quietly and solemnly by our own fireside, James told me the whole.

“He was, as I said, a monomaniac. Mad on one point only, the rest of his mind being clear and sound.”

“And that point was—”

“The desire to murder his wife. He

told me," pursued James, when my horror had a little subsided, "that it came upon him first in the very honeymoon—beginning with the sort of feeling that I have heard several people say that they had at the climax of happiness—the wish there and then to die—together. Afterwards, day and night, whenever they were alone, the temptation used to haunt him. A physician himself, he knew that it was a monomania; but he also knew that, if he confessed it, he, sane on all other points, would be treated as a madman, and that his wife, the only creature he loved, would look on him with horror for ever. There was but one course to save himself and her; he took it, and never swerved from it."

"But in his illness?"

"Then, being perfectly helpless, he knew he could not harm her, and in great bodily weakness most monomanias usually subside. His left him entirely. When he grew stronger it returned. You know the rest. His life was one long torture. Peace be with him now."

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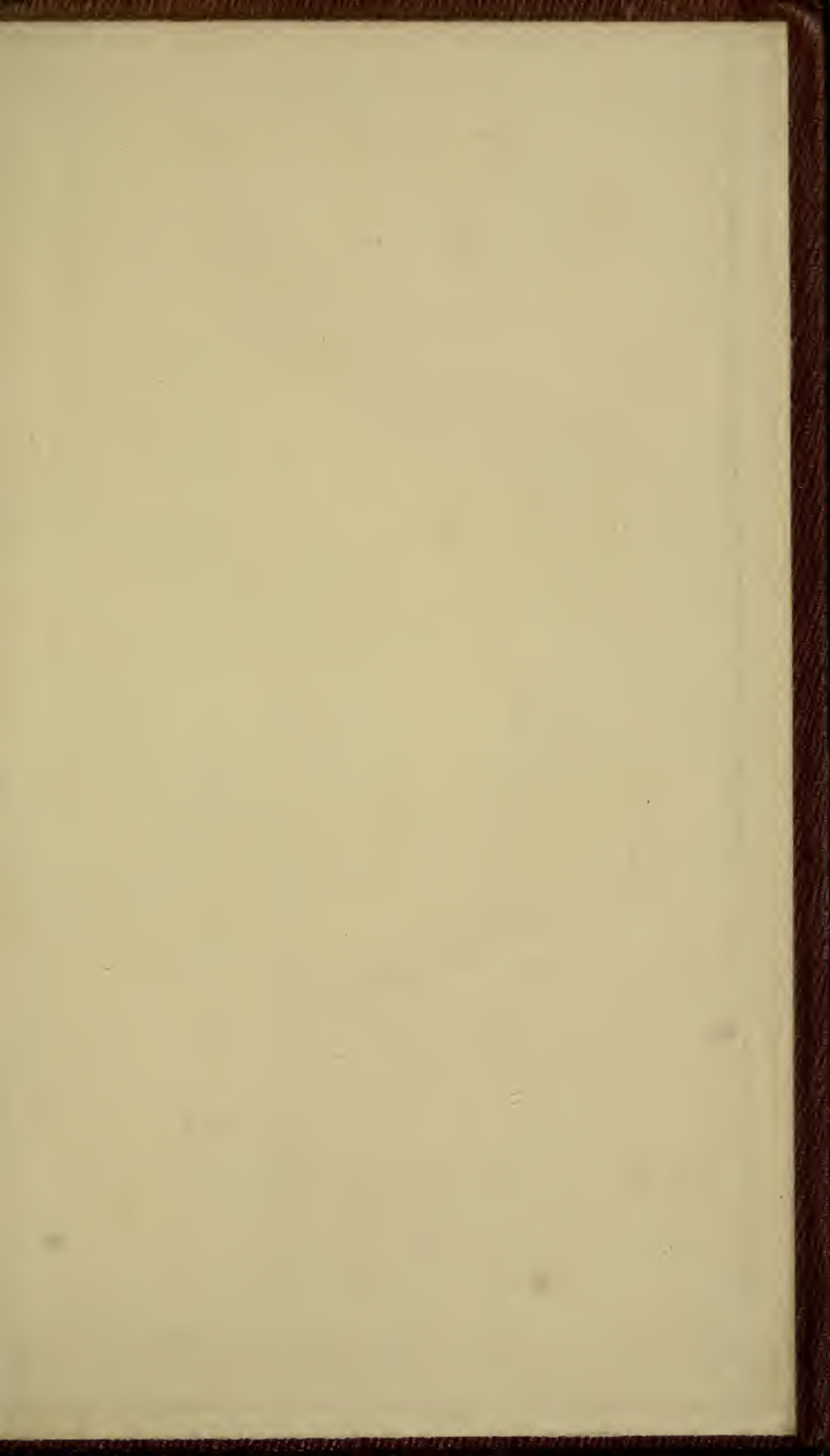
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